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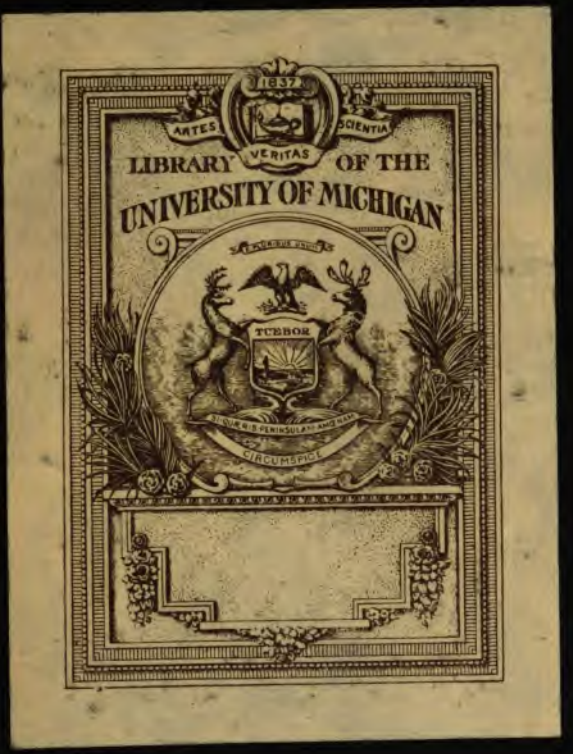
MY INDIAN SUMMER

Princess Altieri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MY INDIAN SUMMER

MY

INDIAN SUMMER

BY

PRINCESS OLGA CANTACUZÈNE-ALTIERI

TRANSLATED BY

AGNES EUAN-SMITH

LONDON
ADAM AND CHARLES BLACK
1894

L-11-18. MC.

CHAPTER I

'WHEN the showers of early autumn follow close upon a very sultry summer, it is not unusual to see some trees in the orchards covered with the blossoms of spring—mostly those who have passed through the hot season, apparently barren and parched up, owing to some catastrophe that befell them in the early spring, either perhaps an unusual storm, or a very late frost which blighted their first promising bloom, and left them bare and leafless. Under the influence of the soft warm damp of autumn, however, the sap in their branches, so long checked by the burning heat of the past summer, begins to rise and to swell into new buds and leaves. When the fall of the leaf announces the approach of winter, the last rays of the autumn sun cause the rapid and feverish bursting forth of these untimely flowers, gifted

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with that strange melancholy beauty which characterises all things that appear out of season, blossoms alas! which are destined to remain barren and fruitless, and to fall with the first snows of winter.

'This phenomenon of a second bloom in a woman's life is often to be found, especially in the case of one who, deceived and misunderstood in early life, has seen all her first sweet and natural hopes cruelly blighted and withered.

'The memory of past sorrows has never yet sufficed to shield a woman's heart from a fresh surprise of love: her heart has been created, fashioned, formed to love and be loved, —it belongs to her very nature, and she is ever liable to fall a victim to her affections. In vain she strives to shield herself from the assaults of love by a triple guard of pride, experience, and virtue; love has only to deceive such a heart by some subterfuge, some thin disguise of friendship, charity, compassion or enthusiasm—what you will—and it falls an easy victim. The most fatal mistake a woman can make, is to persuade herself that the romance of her life is completely ended with her youth, and that she has nothing further to

fear from passion, with its struggles, its storms, and its errors.'

I must crave the forgiveness of the author whose words I have quoted in the preceding page, for I have only copied them, that I might have the pleasure of refuting them, as I consider they are strangely incorrect. Doubtless he ignores two things—first, there are certain misfortunes, the very memory of which suffices to shield the heart for ever, from what he is pleased to call 'the surprise of love'; secondly, there is a far more powerful safeguard than the triple shield he speaks of, viz. 'maternal love.'

Nevertheless I read with unmixed pleasure the superb article of literary criticism from which I have taken my extract. This article bore the signature 'Valrogis,' and on reading it I uttered a cry of surprise. My daughter, who was seated near me deep in the study of a mathematical essay, raised her pretty head which she had buried in her hands and asked:

'What is the matter, mother?'

'"Valrogis" the name of the writer of this article!'

'Well, mother dear?'

'It is my mother's name; your grandmother was a Valrogis.'

'Ah!'

There was so much expression in this 'Ah!' that the course of my thoughts was changed at once, and I looked earnestly at Silvia. Could it have arisen from the difficulty she found in puzzling out alone those complex circles and triangles, which were quite beyond my comprehension? A cloud passed over her fair face, her lips seemed on the point of asking me a question, but she thought better of it, bent her head over her book and seemed once more absorbed in her abstruse study; but I noticed that her lips trembled. Poor child! she had never ventured to question me on that past, of which she must have learnt something from our old servants, and I, on my part, had never had the courage to revive the memory of my former sorrows by speaking of them to her—her curiosity, I knew, was most natural and lawful.

'Silvia,' I asked, 'do you think I ought to write to this Valrogis to inquire if he is a relation of ours?'

'As you like, mother, but after all Valrogis may be only a *nom de plume*. Before writing,

do you not think it would be wiser to find out something definite about him? This you could easily do by writing to the publishers of the Review, or to the editor.'

'Quite right, dear.' Always prudent and thoughtful! The practical view of things was the first that presented itself to Silvia's mind. She may have inherited this cautious disposition from a far-distant ancestor, certainly not from any of those of the immediately preceding generations. But she was perfectly right; before opening a communication with this Valrogis, it would be better, I felt, to learn something positive respecting him, and then—what after all was to be gained by writing to him?

Buried at the foot of these Tuscan hills, forgotten by the outer world for so many years, why should I begin a correspondence which might possibly result in forcing me to form a circle of new relations and friends? If this Valrogis proved to be a relative, he would of course consider himself obliged to visit us some day or other, and involuntarily I trembled, as I foresaw all that might thus arise to break the peaceful monotony of our present life. Later on, should Silvia grow weary of this absolute

solitude, I might decide to quit Ventaglia that she might see something of the world;—but I dreaded such a contingency from the bottom of my heart. There was no need of haste in this matter, perhaps it might never become necessary to sacrifice all my tastes and habits, though were Silvia's happiness at stake, I would of course do so without a second thought. But would my child ever be as happy as she had been for the first eighteen years of her life, when we two had been absolutely all in all to each other?

This man Valrogis, it was plain, could not grasp the truth that maternal love could utterly fill a woman's heart and satisfy all her highest aspirations. And yet how noble and elevating were his sentiments expressed in the article before me! The book he was criticising was one of those dreary romances of a depraved school, written in a French unintelligible to any save the initiated, in which the author delighted in dissecting a woman physically and morally, in laying bare before the reader all the charms of her body and the deformity of her soul, making her heart the seat of every evil passion, in order that he might demonstrate

triumphantly that the moving spring of all sentiment is selfishness. I had never read the book, and I was annoyed that 'Valrogis' should have wasted so much eloquence in flagellating its author; such works should be buried in silence and neglect. But with what skill and delicacy had he drawn his ideal of woman, in contrast to the repulsive heroine of the novel! how cleverly he had analysed the motives which govern the actions of our sex, finding beneath our falls and our mistakes, the ruling passion of our nature, the desire of self-devotion. Nevertheless the writer of the criticism, whole pages of which I already knew by heart, could not be a young man; such knowledge of the human heart, such mature judgment, could only have been acquired by years of experience. He was evidently no tyro, he must have written before, and I determined to find out and procure all that he had previously published. This name Valrogis, even though a pseudonym, was no longer indifferent to me. I could not help copying page after page of his review, but why should I not talk over the matter with him, I thought, why not tell him face to face, what I thought of his ideas, and criticise them by word

of mouth? why not seek to convince him, for instance, that he was wrong in refusing to believe, that some women's hearts were perfectly incapable of the melancholy phenomenon he called a second bloom? In order to convince him of his mistake, I needed only to relate the history of my own life, awake the sad memory of the terrible storm that had wrecked my own youth, and tell him of the eighteen years of profound peace which had followed that storm, and had gently led me to riper years, without a dream, a wish, an inspiration to ruffle my heart, that was so filled with the love of my only child, there was no room for any other feeling. This Valrogis, this man of whom I knew nothing save the name, will never perchance read these pages, as I know they will never be published, therefore I write freely for myself only. Probably as soon as my manuscript is written I shall destroy it. Perhaps, however, I may place it in some secret drawer where Silvia will find it, as I found so many of my mother's letters in her old desk in our Florentine palace. She will then learn the true story of my past life, which she is afraid to ask for now.

CHAPTER II

At the time of my birth my father and mother had only numbered thirty-eight years between them. They gave me the name of Palma, because I entered on this life on Palm Sunday—*Domenica della Palma*—in the glorious spring-tide, the most lovely delicious season of the whole year in Florence, when masses of narcissus and iris are sold at every street corner in the Mercato Nuovo, the very donkeys feasting on bunches of violets and roses, which are too plentiful to find buyers for their superabundance.

Out of the crowd of peasant women who sought the honour of being my wet nurse, my parents chose the prettiest of them all: she came from the Bagni di Lucca, where the women are renowned for their health and beauty. From the moment of her arrival, Generosa devoted herself to me body and soul,

and she has never left me. The day on which she entered my parents' service her husband started for America, from which place, poor man, he never returned. When Generosa heard of his death some years later, she learnt at the same time that he had made a good deal of money, and she at once took steps to secure this, his father's heritage, for her little son. On inquiry, however, she found that when he opened his shop as a pork butcher, he had also formed new family ties, had married a mulatto woman, and thanks to her thrifty care, had so prospered, that when he died he left a well-furnished house, a large *clientèle*, a flourishing widow and five splendid children, who were like little steps rising one above another, or the graduated pipes of an organ. Poor Generosa! she had only been married in a church, not civilly, and she learnt to her cost now, that the state did not recognise her claim as his legal wife, and she was therefore compelled to let matters rest. To crown her misfortunes, her boy, whom she had left behind at the Bagni di Lucca under the care of his grandmother, died suddenly from a surfeit of melons or *cocomeri*, and she was left childless.

As soon as she became my nurse, she was decked out with bright ribbons, laces and embroideries, her beautiful plaits of shining brown hair were fastened with flowers of silver filigree and *spilloni* or pins like small daggers; after which, my young parents, who were extravagantly proud of their first baby, installed us both, Generosa and myself, the one carrying the other, in a fine carriage drawn by four splendid bays, in which we all went daily for a drive in the 'Cascine,' or park of Florence. There, other carriages would draw up on the Piazzone, their occupants chattering to each other, admiring the *bambina* and relating the latest news or scandal of the day, while they arranged fresh rendezvous for the evening, after the *Pergola*.[1] All was smiles and flowers, and pleasures and fêtes, really too much so, for in the midst of all this excitement my poor young mother found no time for the rest her delicate health imperatively needed. Married when she was only just seventeen, this whirl of pleasure which had scarcely been interrupted by my advent, began practically to undermine her strength; she grew paler and paler, and daily weaker. My father,

[1] The principal theatre of Florence.

who adored her, was too young himself to take proper care of her; he fancied that distraction was the sovereign remedy for all ills, consequently he was ever arranging fresh pleasures for each succeeding day, not realising in the least that this only resulted in his wife's increased languor and weakness. When at last he saw that his treatment produced an exactly contrary effect to that which he expected, he fell into utter despair, and with his usual impetuosity he allowed her to see this plainly.

My young mother made superhuman efforts to dispel his anxiety, by appearing much stronger than she really was, in order to deceive her husband, who was only too ready and glad to be deceived. She struggled against her weakness and bore her sufferings bravely, that she might go everywhere with him as she had done at first.

The physicians having ordered her to the country, in the hope that she might find the much-needed rest, my father eagerly seized on the idea of settling down at Ventaglia for the summer season. Our villa was only three hours from Florence, just a convenient distance for country parties, *déjeûners champêtres*,

soirées vénétiennes;—consequently our house was never without guests. They danced every evening on the broad terrace, after theatricals in the orangery. While the orchestra played in the loggia, groups would saunter away under the leafy oaks, or converse together by the side of marble fountains, so that often the nightingale's song was succeeded by that of the first lark, before the last chords of the violin or guitar had ceased to vibrate through the fresh morning air. This was scarcely the life suited for a very delicate young girl. At last one day, after a long swoon which left her exhausted, and plunged my father into utter despair, he sent for a famous doctor, a professor at the University of Pisa, who candidly declared my mother was in a most critical state and needed the strictest *régime* and care.

Unfortunately this medical celebrity was a little old man of singular appearance, dressed like the wise dog we see in children's picture books. His palpable wig, his huge spectacles, his figured waistcoat, his impossible cravat, all provoked an irresistible smile in every beholder, and prevented his grave warning from taking any effect. The day after his visit, his advice

had been completely forgotten, the memory of his ridiculous appearance only remaining.

Whilst my pretty young mother gradually drooped more and more, I grew and flourished, and Generosa, who was now promoted to the dignity of being my *bonne*, amused herself in decking me out like a Madonna in a shrine. While my arms and legs were bare, the rest of my small person was a mere bundle of lace and satin, which every one delighted to cover with kisses; thus be-ribboned and adorned, I was ever in the arms or on the knees of the gay *habitués* of the villa; while Generosa herself, clad in a handsome robe of bright-coloured silk, with kerchief and apron of embroidered muslin, and a thick necklace of coral beads round her brown neck, seated on the ground at my mother's feet, gloried in the admiration lavished on me. I was horribly spoilt, for no one ever dreamed of crossing my slightest wish; children's cries and tears generally arise when they are wisely checked by their elders, but in my case I never needed to shed a tear. Every caprice of mine was an order Generosa gladly obeyed, or she cleverly by some ingenious device distracted my attention, when it was

impossible to gratify my passing whims. Thus I was always good-humoured, being never thwarted; and I have often since thought that to this excessive indulgence, I owed the preservation of that even temper which I now possess, and which I inherited from my parents. I should not, however, dare to recommend to any one else this system of education.

Alas! the image of my lovely young mother has almost entirely faded from my memory. I can only remember the day (I was just five) when Generosa, drowned in tears, took me by the hand and led me into the great *salon*. All the chandeliers were lit though it was noonday, the frescoes on the walls were covered with black draperies, relieved by wreaths of cypress and fringes of gold. In the middle of the *salon* stood a sort of platform on which lay my young mother, surrounded by roses and heliotrope. She was very white, and was dressed in her ball dress trimmed with rose-coloured satin, which I had seen her wearing only a very few days before. Her hair was adorned with roses and diamonds, and white gloves covered her tiny hands which held a rosary of coral between the fingers. I fancied the *salon* had been

decorated for theatricals, as it had been so often before, but I turned anxiously to Generosa to ask why my mother was so still.

Suddenly I saw my father, his features distorted by grief, his hair disordered, his eyes haggard. 'Generosa,' he cried hoarsely, 'are you mad? What possessed you to bring that child here? Take her away immediately.'

He seized me himself and hurried to my nursery, grasping me so tightly that I screamed out in terror. He laid me on my little bed and covered me with kisses, from which I strove to defend myself by vigorous blows of my hands and feet, for he positively hurt me by his frenzied embrace, and I mingled my shrieks with his sobs. When at last he let me go, he looked like a madman, tearing his hair and crying like a child, and Generosa told me when I was older that the doctor who attended my mother feared at one time he would lose his reason, and urged him strongly to take a long journey. My father at first flatly refused, he could not bear the thought of leaving the grave, where lay the remains of a wife he had so tenderly loved.

His aunt, the old Princess Landi, then sug-

gested his taking me to Paris to my grandmother, the Marquise de Valrogis, who had never seen me, and my father yielded: for with her he felt he could talk of his dead wife constantly, and linger over the recollections of her short life. I was sent with Generosa, as I could not do without her, any more than she could without me. My grandmother was not a very demonstrative person: child as I was, I understood perfectly that she would not get on with my father, she found fault with my education, or rather my total want of education, and did not the least comprehend my father's character, seeing only his faults, and quite overlooking his charming and winning qualities. Fancying that I could read, she gave me one day as a present, a book which she said was most interesting. But alas! I had only just mastered the alphabet: I could read a few words of Italian, but I knew nothing of French, and the only thing I cared for in a book was the pictures. The book she gave me had none, so I tossed it aside as soon as I discovered this. 'What! are you not going to read it?' asked my grandmother. I at once confessed my ignorance without the least shame.

After this discovery she had a long conversation with my father, which resulted in the apparition in our household of a small thin personage with a face like a weasel, neither young nor old, and not exactly plain, to whom my father presented me, saying, 'Carina! here is your governess, Mademoiselle Fournier, who is kind enough to promise to try and make you a perfect well of knowledge.'

A few days later, we quitted Paris to my intense joy. I regretted nothing, not even my grandmother, for she had attempted to treat me with a strictness to which I was hitherto quite a stranger. Generosa was as delighted as I was to return to Florence, but her joy was damped by the presence of Mademoiselle Fournier, against whom, from the very first, she nourished a feeling of jealousy mingled with hidden enmity.

My father's first care after our return was to order a superb monument for my mother's grave. He wished that it should be surmounted by an angel resembling herself, but this was not easy, for the artist to whom the work was entrusted had never seen her. My father therefore passed whole days in his

atelier, watching his work, and suggesting first a feature, and then some alteration. One day the artist placed a sketch-book in his hands, saying, 'Will you kindly just sketch that line by the lip that you understand so well? Perhaps you will succeed better than I can, in giving the precise expression you desire, but which I cannot produce to your satisfaction.' 'How!' replied my father, 'I do not sketch.' The artist insisted, 'You can at least try.' My father complied, and with such success, that the next day the sculptor had prepared for his use a lump of clay and modelling tools, which he at once handled with surprising facility.

For months after this he threw himself into the work with absorbing energy. Some of his friends, having found their way into the studio he had fitted up near the Porta Romana, delighted in spending part of their mornings in watching him at work. Then when twilight came and further work was impossible, they led him off to the club, which for a long time he had quite forsaken. By degrees he resumed his ordinary habits, and his daily life, in which I took my share unperceived by any one. The idea of sending me away when he was sur-

rounded by his friends, as they smoked and related club stories, or the passing news of the day, never seemed to enter his head.

As soon as our mourning was over, he took me with him to the theatre, escorted by Mademoiselle Fournier, who was not sufficiently versed in the manners of Florentine society to know whether she ought to do without protest, what in any other country she would have been horrified to do. She gave herself the benefit of the doubt and preferred making no objections, and though she felt her pupil would have been far better in bed at those late hours, she could not deny herself the pleasure of any chance of amusement. For my own part I found it extremely wearisome, seated between my father, who was discussing with his friends, subjects quite beyond me, and Mademoiselle, who took no notice whatever of me. She had attracted a small circle around her of such widowers as she thought might possibly contemplate a second marriage, and artists on the road to fame who were as yet single, on whom she bestowed excellent advice. She was a most sensible, practical woman, and being anxious to make a good solid marriage, would never have allowed

herself to be led away by any feelings of romance. I daresay she had secretly studied my father to discover whether it would be possible to lay her plans for his capture, but she was far too clever not to recognise very soon the utter impossibility of success in any such scheme. My father, who was gifted with a vivid imagination which led him to adopt eagerly any novelty in ideas, projects, or occupations, and at the same time never completed any enterprise if some new fancy arose to distract his thoughts, was on the other hand singularly steadfast in his affections, a strange characteristic combined with his otherwise versatile disposition. Never did the memory of his lost wife grow fainter in his heart, and I feel certain that the desire of deadening the poignancy of his grief, and of weakening the sense of past sorrow, which caused him such suffering, was the real cause of those wild ideas, those extraordinary schemes, which led those who knew nothing of the secret of his life, to look upon him as eccentric almost to madness.

His passion for sculpture had lasted for ten months, when suddenly a young French artist

discovered that he had a marvellous talent for colour, and persuaded him to go to Paris and study painting there. My father seized on this idea with feverish enthusiasm; his atelier was abandoned to the workmen in his employ, with instructions to let it as soon as possible, and to dispose of the unfinished works it contained. As it was summer-time, he would not leave me in Florence, but sent me to Ventaglia. The sorrow of parting from him was the first I had ever known in my little life, for I had not of course understood the death of my mother, having been far too much spoiled to have developed any precocious feelings at that time.

However, my grief soon passed away, for the new life now before me was exactly what I most delighted in. Worn out by the unaccustomed heat, devoured by mosquitoes, terrified by the stories of scorpions, adders, bats, etc., that Generosa gloried in retailing to her, with every possible exaggeration, Mademoiselle Fournier was utterly powerless to struggle against her lassitude and languor. Indeed, she so detested the profound solitude of Ventaglia which had succeeded our bright and brilliant life at Florence, that she took no pains

to conceal her ill-humour, but I cared not one jot. While she passed the hottest hours of the day shut up in her own room, drinking iced lemonade, I, who feared the sun no more than the lizards, ran over the country accompanied by Generosa, who liked nothing better than to get me away from the authority of the governess she hated, and to have me all to herself. We paid visits to all our friends—the *contadini* (peasants) that we knew for miles round: with my hair hanging down like a mane, without dress or shoes, on account of the heat, I looked like the veriest little *contadina* myself. I knew thoroughly all about country pursuits, I helped my friends to milk their cows and to look after the silkworms. We would sometimes climb to the top of the hill where the olive groves gave place to the chestnut woods, under whose shade grazed flocks of goats and sheep, and then I helped the shepherds to make delicious cheeses of *ricotta*, on which I feasted afterwards right well. When Mademoiselle protested against these escapades, I listened laughing, strong in the approval of Generosa, whom I knew by instinct, my father trusted far more than he did Mademoiselle. When summer was drawing to

its close, I often lingered in the farms till midnight: when the sun set and the church bell rang for the Ave Maria, then all work ceased and we assembled in the great kitchen, where the *massaia* (or farmer's wife) had in readiness huge baskets of Indian corn to be shelled. The father of the household then recited the rosary, to which all responded aloud, and after this any one of the party who remembered verses of Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata*, or of the *Orlando*, would repeat them for the benefit of the rest. Then followed tales and romances, to which I listened open-mouthed, my elbows on my knees, my chin in my hands, carried away into that fantastic land of saints and fairies in which the graceful fancy of the Tuscan people delights to wander, a kind of earthly paradise into whose precincts the arch-tempter never penetrates, save under the grotesque form either of a humpbacked gnome or a malicious dwarf, easily routed by some witticism, whilst *Maria Sanctissima* is ever ready to help those in difficulty or danger, by some beautiful timely miracle.

But the red-letter days were those when the travelling knife-grinder or *arruotino* arrived,

bringing to each farm in turn marvellous tales, now of some new miracle, now legends of the past, in which the *rôle* of traitor or villain was always borne by a Pisan, whereas in Pisan territory the part was always attributed to a Florentine or Lucchese. The arrival of such a *raconteur* was announced days before —all the farm people trooped in to some special farm, the shepherds even came down from the mountains, and the evening lasted far into the night. Truly these evenings were to my mind far more delightful than those I had spent at the *Pergola* in Florence.

Generosa never thought of taking me home till the very last basket of maize had been shelled, and the party had broken up. We walked home by the light of the countless stars that gemmed the dark azure sky, while the last fireflies chased each other under the olive groves, and the owls from the tall cypresses called to each other with their mournful cry. Almost always we were escorted by some peasant boy playing on his *organetto*. The discords which he produced on his instrument were mingled with the *stornelli* or country songs which he shouted at the very

top of his voice. When he stopped to take breath, the peasant maidens, who were returning to their farms, would take up the strain and answer him back from the far distance. The unmixed pleasure these walks were to me, was no way dashed by the thought of the lectures that I knew awaited me at home. I generally found Mademoiselle installed on the *loggia*, an ice cream in one hand, a large fan in the other, vainly striving to beat away the mosquitoes, that seemed to take a special delight in tormenting her. Fortunato, my father's old *fattore* or steward, was always with her, narrating to her in his beautiful Tuscan Italian, the past splendours of Ventaglia, the Homeric battles between the Balducci of old and the Cecchi di Serramonte, while he strove earnestly to understand the questions the poor lady addressed to him in an extraordinary lingo she flattered herself was the purest Italian. Her mistakes were Fortunato's delight, and he would repeat them afterwards to Generosa with roars of laughter. My return, of course, put a stop to their conversation, and then began a long lecture, the effect of which was completely spoilt by the knowing looks and winks the

fattore exchanged with Generosa, and which I caught passing between them, in spite of their respectful outward demeanour. The lecture invariably wound up thus: 'Comte Balducci shall be informed of all this as soon as he returns.' Spite of this threat I went to bed quite happy, firmly resolved to do exactly the same the next day.

When the vintage came, it brought new joys in its train. I used to leave the villa before day-break, while Mademoiselle Fournier was still asleep, took my meals in the open air with the vintagers at noon, under the shade of a fig-tree, sharing their polenta and their chestnut bread, and I never returned home before night, my face and hands stained with grape juice, like a little bacchante, the most tired, but the happiest little girl in the wide world.

When the chestnut trees began to shed their fruit, towards the end of the autumn, my father arrived at Ventaglia quite unexpectedly. I shall never forget the moment, when springing from the *bagherino* in which he had driven up, he seized me in his arms and pressed me to his heart, with a grip that brought back to my memory the way in which he had clasped me

on the day my mother died. He kissed my hair and my cheeks, and looked into my eyes anxiously, as if he would fain discover in me some trace, some likeness of her. With his arm round my neck, while I covered his hands with kisses, we went up the marble steps that led to the *loggia*. All the servants, delighted at the return of a master whom they had known since he was an infant, rushed forward to kiss his hand, to welcome him, and to ask his news, with that respectful familiarity which characterises all Tuscan servants. 'Heaven be praised! how well you look, how stout your Excellency has grown.' This latter an inevitable compliment, the omission of which would betoken an utter want of good manners. The fat cook who had emerged from his kitchen, with his white apron, cap in hand, and who could scarcely bow from his excessive *embonpoint*, never ceased in his delight to exclaim, 'How stout your Excellency has grown!' to which my father, tall and slender as a poplar, in his well-fitting travelling costume, replied laughingly, as he tapped Antonio, 'Not as stout as thyself, but I know it will not be thy fault if I take a long time in equalling thee—

and now for the *tordello*, the *tortellini*, the *agnellotti*, the *risotto*, and all the good country dishes that thou art so famous for.' This pleasantry of the *padrone* provoked a general laugh, for all rejoiced heartily at his return. And now from beneath the *loggia* Mademoiselle advanced with a slow and stately step, receiving my father's frank, hearty grasp of the hand, by extending to him the tips of three fingers, and then without any further preamble, launching out into a harangue on the various causes of displeasure I had given her during his absence. She recounted to him all my numerous peccadillos in the most dramatic manner, but alas! the result of this eloquence was exactly the opposite to what she expected, for my father only burst out into a fit of laughter. I am not quite sure that the prim countenance of Mademoiselle had not something to do with his mirth, but there was evidently a deeper reason still. My escapades probably brought to his memory those of his own youth which he had not left so far behind, and I fancied that my young father, still so full of gaiety and energy, spite of the sorrow that clouded his life, felt that he would have delighted in playing similar

tricks to those which had so shocked my governess. Generous, prodigal, extravagant to a degree, he had never learnt the value of money, and during my mother's lifetime, he had already dipped deeply into the ample fortune he inherited on his coming of age. He had never dreamt of denying himself the indulgence of any whim, simply on the score of expense, and his purse was always open to the demands of any friend in distress who craved his help. Nothing had ever seemed beautiful or elegant enough to lavish on the wife he adored, and he had given her jewels a queen might have envied. But when her untimely death cut short his happy, careless career, and it was necessary to look into his affairs, his faithful steward, who had hitherto vainly warned him respecting his imprudence, at last made him see that it was absolutely necessary to take some decided steps towards satisfying his creditors.

He was compelled to mortgage Ventaglia and to let part of his palace in Florence: and then he, who had about as much knowledge of speculating as I had, imagined he might recover his late losses by other means. Being a great lover of horses, and possessing the finest

stud in Florence, he persuaded himself that, if he only seriously studied the subject, he might win millions on the racecourse. Accordingly, during the whole of the next winter I heard nothing talked of but horses, foals, fillies, jockeys and handicaps—sculpture and painting were completely forgotten.

In the spring he went to Naples to watch the horses he had sent to run in the well-known races there, and he returned enthusiastic about the success which his friend the Prince Dell' Orso had had, in planting cotton at Torre del Greco, at Amalfi, and on the slopes of Mount Vesuvius. Convinced that the mild climate and the stony soil of the hill that rose between Ventaglia and the Val di Nievole were admirably adapted to the cultivation of cotton, he rooted up the magnificent plantation of olive trees which clothed the hill and brought him in a great profit, in spite of the earnest protestations of Fortunato, who with tears trickling down his grey moustache, was compelled to stand by and witness the destruction which he had refused to direct.

The terraces were levelled at great expense, and in the spring-time the cotton shrubs were

planted. Every morning my father went to inspect and tend the young plants, and I, of course, never failed to accompany him and share his enthusiasm over the rapid progress of the little cotton trees, which seemed to grow before our very eyes.

The following summer was remarkably dry and warm, and consequently in the autumn the new plantation was like a most flourishing nursery garden. My father was so delighted, that he would have liked to bring the whole world to admire the success of his attempts at acclimatising this new growth in Italy. He had already calculated the produce of the harvest; computed the sale price of the different qualities of raw cotton, and knew to a centime the profits he should realise on each year's crop. He made preparations therefore for rooting up next year, several most productive vineyards, which he meant to replace by cotton plantations. When winter set in, we all removed to our palace in Florence, to Mademoiselle's intense delight, but before leaving, my father gave Fortunato orders to send a daily telegram respecting the condition of his new plantation.

One morning the message ran thus: 'Yesterday night, snow. To-night hard frost, all the cotton bushes dead.' My father made a slight grimace of disappointment, and then threw the telegram from him with a gesture that struck me as so graceful, that for several days after, I used to stand before my glass trying to imitate it. 'Fortunato ought to be very pleased,' he said laughingly to me, 'and I am just as delighted too. In truth I cannot imagine why I ever took it into my head to become an American planter. Come here, Carina, I am going to tell you a secret, but it must be strictly between us two, you must not breathe a word to any one, not even to——' and he looked across archly to Mademoiselle Fournier. He took me on his knees, and while I wound my arms round his neck, he said seriously, 'Listen! that which springs from the earth has never enriched any one yet, but underground we find gold, silver, diamonds, precious stones—Mademoiselle must have taught you that of course.' His grave manner astonished me, I could not understand the least what he meant, but I concerned myself very little about this. I was so happy to be with him and in his arms! for the older I

grew, the more I loved him. To me he was the perfect type of kindness, beauty, elegance, and that nameless grace which consists in a thousand trifles of voice, manner, smile. I admired so blindly everything he said or did, that I never dreamt he could even make a mistake. I listened therefore with an interest bordering on enthusiasm, when after drawing out with great mystery from one of the drawers of his writing-table a handful of very ugly stones, he explained to me that ugly as they were, they represented future untold wealth, for they were samples of minerals, especially of copper, which he had found at Ventaglia. 'And consequently, *bambina mia*, after next week we shall commence mining operations at Ventaglia. The German engineer to whom I sent these specimens refuses to undertake the work, and I am glad of it, I really do not need an engineer. I have studied the subject thoroughly, and can do everything myself.'

It was easy to foresee the result of such an enterprise—easy to all, save the little daughter who simply adored her father. I never heard the exact amount of the enormous sum which was frittered away in shafts and scaffoldings,

destined for the extraction of the copper which had no existence save in the lively imagination of the lord of Ventaglia. But he found a keen pleasure in superintending the operations, and overlooking his workmen, who having never before worked under so generous a master, nor one so easily pleased, were in despair when the enterprise was abandoned; this was not done, however, till the hill had been honeycombed with underground passages, like a molehill.

I never saw my father, however, the least distressed at the failure of this most cherished project. I think, in a great measure, this arose from the fact that any check in his plans found him always ready to attempt something else, burning with eagerness to accomplish it, and delighted to have got free from the preceding enterprise; generally his last fallen idol served merely as a pedestal for its successor. The installation of each fresh project was usually the pretext for a splendid fête, to which was invited every possible guest from Florence. At one of these entertainments the whole of the park was lighted up with electric lamps at a fabulous cost. My old Aunt Landi, coming up to my father, who was walking with me hand in hand,

asked me with prim gravity if I practised my music diligently.

'Sometimes,' I replied, startled by this point-blank question, 'but not always—when it amuses me.'

'You are wrong there, *ma petite.* You ought to begin steadily to-morrow; now remember what I say, the day will come when you will be thankful to be able to give lessons to keep yourself from starving.'

My father laughed heartily at this outburst, and only replied by covering me with kisses. We understood each other perfectly, we two. Nothing distressed us as long as we were together. We were just as improvident, the one as the other, just as ready to enjoy the present with no thought for the future, as a couple of birds. Through my father's slender fingers, millions slipped away as if they had been mere sous, without one regret. He was always convinced that some day, some lucky speculation would retrieve all his past losses, but nothing healed the ever open wound in his heart, which he hid carefully from the eyes of the world.

Sometimes his love towards me was almost

fierce; he would look at me with such a passionate expression that I was terrified; peering into my eyes, and then pushing me from him as if he hated me; but when I burst into tears, he would kiss me repeatedly and beg me to forgive him.

Young as I then was, I understood these outbursts, and guessed by instinct the feelings that were passing through his heart. I was in a way the image of his idolised wife, but not quite. I recalled her to him, but I could not fill her place, and he almost resented my presence, which seemed at times only to deepen his sense of her loss. I grew fast, but in our life of constant interruption very little attention was paid to my education: at Ventaglia my studies were always brought to a complete standstill; and there we spent the greater part of the year. I had much less to amuse me when in Florence, and saw far less of my father, for by degrees he spent all his evenings away from me, and so I acquired a taste for reading. About the age of twelve I began to recognise my own ignorance, and I besought my father to give me masters. This request astonished him much, and he reproached himself for never

having thought of doing this sooner. He at once began to look out for the most eminent teachers, for he would accept none but celebrities. At any cost, the professors of the University and learned men of the first rank, were disturbed from their erudite labours, to give lessons to a child who was ignorant of the first rudiments of the knowledge they were to impart to her. In this way I learned the rules of Latin verse before I knew spelling, and chemistry before I had heard the names of the capitals of Europe. These lessons, however, were by no means regular, for the slightest pretext served to break through their course. During this winter, there was a succession of theatricals given at our Palazzo Balducci, which possessed an admirably arranged theatre. My father, as usual, displayed so much talent for acting, that those who witnessed his performances were constantly regretting that he had not been compelled to go on the stage for his livelihood. Thinking to amuse me, he set me one day to learn the part of a coquettish, inquisitive young girl, and I acted so badly that he did nothing but laugh at my awkwardness.

The Princess Dell' Orso, who was to have acted with him, being absent from one of the rehearsals, he put the libretto into my hands and told me just to read her part, which was very dramatic and passionate. After I had uttered two or three of the opening phrases, he stopped and looked at me with amazement. I had thrown myself so completely into the heroine's part confided to me, that at the end of the scene I burst into a flood of tears.

'Take care what you are about, Silvio,' cried my Aunt Landi from the bottom of the hall where she was watching the rehearsal;—'the child will play that part in real earnest some of these days;—I would rather see her succeed as a coquette. She may then make others suffer a little, but she will not weep herself.'

However, as it was impossible, at my age and with my figure, to entrust to me parts requiring great passion, my acting was stopped for the present.

CHAPTER III

I HAD now attained my fourteenth year; I was tall for my age, slight like my father, and precociously developed, thanks to the free healthy country life in which the greater part of each year was spent.

It was in the month of June of a peculiarly sultry season. The heat had been so great that already the reaped corn stood in sheaves along the fields and against the barns, waiting for the flail of the thresher, whilst in the fields already ploughed for the second harvest, the tender green of the maize began to develop into large leaves. The flax fields, with their velvety blue carpet of blossoms, were turning yellow under the burning rays of the sun, and glorious red lilies and gladioli flamed along every path. Spite of the tropical heat, which was perceptible even from the first streak of dawn, I betook myself to a farm about three

miles distant from Ventaglia;—my father was travelling, and during his absence it was no pleasure to me to remain at home.

The daughter of Ago, tenant of this farm, was to be married on the following day, so the exceptional heat was not in my opinion a sufficient barrier to prevent me from being with Ersilia in this all-important crisis of her simple life. She had been my companion in all my childish escapades, and I had been the *confidante* of her tears and woe during the two years that her *damo* (lover) had been absent, seeking his fortune in America. I had written at her dictation many and many a letter to him, for her knowledge of writing did not allow her to do more than sign her name. When Nino returned bringing with him a little money, and a cage of red-winged birds, he presented the latter to me as an act of homage and gratitude, and I prized his gift far more than the rich presents that were showered on me by my father's lady friends. I had been initiated into the secrets of all the preparations that had been going on at the farm for months past. I knew to an inch the number of yards of linen that Ersilia's sisters had spun for her trousseau, and

I had duly admired the black silk dress, the marriage veil of Rapallo lace, and the great gold *spillone* (pin for the hair), the gift of the bridegroom.

I was anxious to give Ersilia a wedding present that she would really like, and when my father was at home, money was never lacking to me. He never even counted over the piles of gold which he made over to me, and which only passed through my fingers into the brown hands of my humble friends; but at this juncture my father was away and my purse was empty. I had numberless jewels, but when I came to turn them over, they were all too delicate, and not showy enough, though they were very valuable. I had a necklace of coral for instance, of a pale rose pink, like the heart of a wild rose, but I knew well, that would not be half as pretty in Ersilia's eyes as the string of deep-red heavily-cut coral beads which her mother always clasped round her neck on Sundays and fête days. I decided at last on giving two superb pear-shaped pearls, which she was certain to care for less than a pair of heavy, massive gold ear-rings with a monumental brooch to match, more or less imitation,

which Generosa meant to give her. When I revealed to the latter my intention of giving away my lovely ear-rings, she protested loudly against my excessive liberality; but I was perfectly determined to get rid of them—they had been sent to me the previous Christmas by the Princess Dell' Orso, and as I did not like her, I had never worn them.

Custom required that the marriage should take place in the church about three o'clock in the morning, consequently the *déjeûner* that was to follow the ceremony had all to be prepared the evening before, and as many guests were expected, there was plenty to do.

Generosa, flushed and excited, with her arms and shoulders bare, mixed endless quantities of sugar and flour and buttered numerous moulds in which were to be baked the delicious delicate biscuits called *bocca di dama*, while I zealously turned cakes of chestnut flour fried in oil, and carefully stuck them over with pine seeds and leaves of rosemary. I soon, however, wearied of a pleasure which the intense heat turned into fatigue and toil.

Following Generosa's example, I had taken off my dress and my shoes and stockings, and

while she went on beating eggs and chattering like a magpie, I went out under the thick leafy shade of the *pergola* (or vine walk) where the bunches of young grapes were beginning to swell, and passed on towards the road, along the border of which ran a cool sparkling brook. I pushed aside the tall stalks of iris and arum lilies that stopped me, and plunged my little bare feet with delight into the cool scented tufts of wild mint that grew in the clear water. The sweet meadow scents filled the air, and above my head a blackbird was singing in a cherry-tree laden with fruit within easy reach of my hand. I raised my arm to bring down one of the branches within reach of my lips, when a sound of whispering close by caused me to stand motionless, and without changing my position I looked round to see whence the voices came.

Standing in a shady corner of the *pergola* was Ersilia, with her head on Nino's shoulder, while she turned upon him a look of intense tenderness, a smile parting the coral lips and revealing a row of ivory teeth, whiter even than the pearls I had just given her; their milky reflections standing out clear against the

golden brown of her skin, through the curls of her pretty hair. He bending over the charming face, radiant with life and happiness, lit up with a look of intense joy, clasped her to his broad chest passionately, almost fiercely. I could not hear what they said, but their conversation ended in a long fervent kiss, and then they sauntered slowly back to the house.

It was perhaps this kiss that settled my fate: at any rate it awakened a strange tumult within me. It must be delightful to love thus! I thought. All my life no one had abstained from speaking most openly before me of love, its first steps, its consequences, nay, even its scandals, and few young girls had been less guarded and shielded as regards the innocence of their ears. But I was, I suppose, blessed with a natural unconsciousness of evil, and happily no unhealthy curiosity had ever influenced me. But from the moment that I had seen Ersilia and Nino in the *pergola*, and watched them disappear down its golden deep shadows, a great change came over me. Their deep inward happiness was as it were revealed to me in a moment, and I realised that such happiness was the greatest boon I could desire

on earth. Slowly a veil seemed lifted from my eyes, and with a kind of astonishment I saw and knew that it was my fate one day to experience the bewildering joy I had seen flash from Ersilia's dark eyes. It was the awakening of my woman's nature in my young soul;—the innocent Eve that had slumbered so long in the depths of my heart, now opened her startled eyes on this life, dreaming that it would be one long future of mutual, blessed, unchanging love, and of devotion and self-sacrifice made easy by the purest passion.

I do not know how long I stood wrapt in these delicious dreams in an earthly paradise, into which, it seemed to me then, no evil could enter. The grasshoppers made the sultry air resound with their sharp cries, the distant murmur of chattering voices in the farmhouse reached me from afar, but I had lost all desire to join them. In the boughs of the cherry-tree I found a charming resting-place; it was very old, its branches were close to the ground and stretched out over the road, but the leaves were so thick that I could not resist the temptation of climbing into them for shade, like any ape or gamin. I settled myself most comfortably in

the fork of two great branches, and there I made a hearty feast off the ripe cherries, choosing the finest to make myself a pair of ear-rings with : up there, amid the branches, a slight breeze was perceptible, but so slight as scarcely to rustle the leaves, still it was something to have a breath of air stirring, and I thoroughly enjoyed myself.

I had with me a volume of Lamartine in which Mademoiselle Fournier had set me some verses to commit to memory, a task I was always glad to fulfil, as I was passionately fond of poetry, and Lamartine's especially. But to-day I turned over the pages with feverish haste—seeking with breathless attention every passage that spoke of love, for I longed to find expression for the strange feelings that filled my heart. The ardent lines of the poet found a ready echo in my breast, and I mentally addressed his eloquent appeals to some unknown being, who was doubtless existing in some part of the world, and whom I should some day meet.

Suddenly the sound of approaching steps made me turn my head towards the road. A horse was coming leisurely towards me, raising a cloud of dust each step it took ; it was a riding

horse evidently, for no sound of wheels accompanied the rattling of the curb chain, as it shook its head impatiently, vainly seeking to free itself from the cloud of flies that pestered it. But who could it be, bold enough to ride along a dusty road like this in the full blaze of noontide? The foliage of the sheltering cherry-tree was so thick that I could only make out the rider when he rode into the patch of shade that it threw on the dazzling white road. Then I knew he was an officer, clad in the blue uniform with white facings which always gives such elegance to its wearer. He was mounted on a splendid black horse, which lashed its sides, that shone like satin, with its tail, in the vain endeavour to drive away the swarms of its winged tormentors: he went at a foot-pace, leaving his steed to take what direction it liked best. This officer might have passed under my cherry-tree quite unconscious of my presence, but for the movement I had made to get a better view of him. In pushing aside the branches, which hid his face from my gaze, I let slip the book resting on my knees, and it fell to the ground wide open, right before his horse's nose, causing it to start and shy violently. The rider looked

at the object which lay on the ground, then raising his eyes, discovered me perched above him.

'Eh! *ragazzina*' (little maid), he cried gaily, 'what are you perched up there for, like a blackbird? Ah! stealing cherries, I see. Are you not afraid of the carabineers? But don't be uneasy, I won't tell on you! on one condition, however, that you will show me my way; am I right for Serramonte?'

Seeing that he took me for a peasant, I answered him back in the purest *patois*, turning my *r's* into *l's* and every *s* into *ch*. 'Yes; this road went to Serramonte, only it branched off a hundred yards further. Then let him turn to the right, cross a stream, go along the opposite bank some way. Then go to the left, then on to the right, till he came to the foot of a hill which could only be climbed on foot, on that side, and by a narrow and very steep path.'

'Turn to the right, go down to the left,' replied the officer, much amused as he mimicked my country accent. 'I'm quite confused; if you were not perched up so high, *bambina mia*, I would ask you to show me the right way yourself.'

'What does that matter?' I cried without hesitation, determined to play my part out, and I began to descend as quickly as I could from my watch-tower. But when I had reached the lowest branches, a new and strange feeling made me hesitate. I flushed involuntarily and lowered my eyes, when I saw that the officer was watching me intently. I shrank from giving the leap I must take with my bare feet. He smiled at my dilemma, saying, 'It is easier to climb up than to get down. Wait a second,' and in a moment he dismounted, and holding his horse's bridle with one hand, he stretched out the other to me. As I still hesitated, he gently lifted me in his arms and set me on the ground, then stooped to pick up the book that had startled his horse, glancing meanwhile at its dusty pages. He quickly raised his head and looked at me astonished, then scrutinised my hands, my bare feet, my tumbled hair adorned with cherry stalks and leaves.

'Pardon, signorina,' he said, with slight confusion, 'do not take the trouble to go with me, you will certainly wound those little white feet, which are not used to walking barefoot over a flinty road.'

'You are quite mistaken,' I replied, laughing. 'I am quite accustomed to that, and I am not afraid of the sun or dust, I am like a lizard.' I was so amused at his confusion that it helped me to recover my own presence of mind. And now in my turn I began to scrutinise him; he had handsome, regular features, and an indefinable look of seriousness which contrasted with the sweetness of his expression. At first he walked in silence by my side holding the bridle of his horse, the poor beast neighing and hanging its head, worn out by heat and flies. I knew the beautiful creature well, for it had belonged to my father; on its jet black skin there was just one single spot of white on its forehead like a star. 'Poor Faust, how tired you are!' I said, patting it gently. 'You are not accustomed to running over bad roads like this in the heat of the day, are you?'

The officer looked at me much surprised. 'You know my horse's name?' he said, hesitatingly. 'I have only had him for a short time, I bought him from Count Balducci.'

I hastened to interrupt him. 'You have chosen quite the worst road to Serramonte.

It is not the proper road at all, only a mule-path. Formerly there was no other way of climbing up to the chateau, which used to be a fortress. Now there is a good carriage road on the other side which passes in front of the great factory.'

'I know it well,' he replied gently, 'but it was precisely this path that I was anxious to discover. I also wished to find out before climbing the hill if there was a stable or barn, where I could leave my horse under the care of a boy who would look after it——' Then he added after a short pause: 'This old ruined chateau struck me as so picturesque, that I wanted to study it from all points.'

I hastened to give him the information he desired. 'Yes, he would find a farm, and he had only to inquire for Vincenzo, called "Rosso," and tell him he was sent by——' but as I was on the point of giving my name, I stopped short.

He looked at me with a smile. 'By whom?' he asked, gently.

'By Signorina Palma.'

'Thanks! I will not fail to do so; meanwhile I present my cordial thanks to Signorina Palma for having put me on the right track, but I

cannot allow her to take another step further; I can find my way quite well alone now.' So saying he raised my hand to his lips, saying softly, 'Many thanks, Signorina Palma,' then sprang into his saddle and disappeared at the turn of the lane amid a clinking of sword and spurs and horse's hoofs, and enveloped in a whirlwind of fine white dust, like a cloud that might have carried St. George himself up to the skies.

I little suspected that this *rencontre* would influence my whole life, and that his image was for ever graven on the heart of a maiden of only fourteen summers. Had he appeared upon my horizon at any other moment, under any other circumstances, perhaps I might soon have forgotten him. Under the impression of the new sentiments that had been awakened in my heart by the sight of that one kiss, my imagination was like a sensitised photographic plate prepared to seize the first image reflected on its surface. I had grown up surrounded by a circle of amiable, lively, pleasing young men, who were my father's intimate friends. More than one had amused himself by a pretended devotion to a little girl

who was neither a coquette nor a prude, and who laughed heartily and openly at the affected or chaffing declarations addressed to her.

My heart, a true child's heart, had never been the least touched by all this sentimental nonsense. I had never dreamt of showing any preference whatever for any of my father's friends. The admiration which I lavished on him, rendered me quite insensible to the charms of any one in his circle of friends, and to me they all seemed immeasurably his inferiors. He was so kind, so gay, so amiable, so clever, and so young. If I had met this officer with him in our own set at Florence, probably I might not have given him a thought,—I do not know. But as I walked slowly down the lane to the farm, I carried in my heart an impression that never faded away, awakened in me by the tender, serious gaze of a pair of soft black eyes. Should I ever see him again? I could not tell, I did not even wish to do so. He had flashed upon me just as if to give a tangible living shape to the ideal created by my own imagination, and that was enough. From henceforth the hero of all my romances, the beloved being to whom all the sweetest

poems seemed addressed, whether the sonnets of Lamartine or the *stornelli* (ballads) of Tuscany, always bore his familiar features, and dark eyes, and wore a light blue uniform with white facings.

Want of occupation, the preparations for the wedding, the sight of the betrothed, the thoughts of love with which the very air I breathed seemed filled, the loneliness of my young life, deprived of all tenderness when my father was away from me, all combined to deepen the impression made on me. Unknown to myself, a great change passed over me. I lost much of my liveliness, and I assumed the ways and manners of a young lady, ashamed of my past hoydenish tricks. I gave up all the wild escapades of my peasant friends, gave up the nightly expeditions with Generosa, the barefooted races under the vine arches, the meals shared with the reapers under a spreading fig-tree in the corner of the field, gave up the dances at the farm to the music of the accordion and the tambourine. These pleasures, which I delighted in no longer, gave place to long solitary reveries, and for entire days I would wander under the magnolias and

laurels in the park, fan in hand, weaving wild dreams, and giving the reins to my fancy, in the pursuit of fantastic adventures: a very dangerous occupation for a young girl.

CHAPTER IV

A DRIVE with Mademoiselle Fournier, *tête-à-tête* in the carriage, had hitherto been a tax on my patience I had carefully avoided; but I dreaded something else even more than the drive, viz. a lesson in arithmetic. Unfortunately the two were generally combined; Mademoiselle, after a fashion peculiarly her own, delighting to bring back the conversation continually to the subject which in her opinion embraced all practical science, and all useful and sensible knowledge, viz. ciphering. She believed everything might be reckoned by figures —the four rules formed the basis of all her reasoning. Poor Mademoiselle! her lot had been cast with a father and daughter both utterly incapable of understanding her beloved science.

I always made use of every possible excuse to avoid going out with her to do the shopping

at Pistoia. But as my father also made a point of having the carriage out every day, she used it for long evening drives when the air was cool, returning home very late, and leaving me free to spend my evenings exactly as I pleased.

But now the tales of the travelling pedlar amused me no longer. I much preferred those that were the fruit of my own fancy, and which I was always making up for my own pleasure. The hero of my dreams was invariably a fine officer in a blue uniform, with a winning expression, on behalf of whom a maiden, aged fourteen (very like myself), accomplished deeds of daring heroism. She followed him to the battle-field strewn with the dead and wounded, received in her own breast the bullets and sabres of his foes, and even, when it was needful, like Baron Munchausen, she arrested the passage of cannon-balls aimed against him. I took such absorbing and keen delight in making up these stories, that the idea of a long silent drive by Mademoiselle's side suddenly seemed very attractive. I should have time, I felt, to save my hero at the peril of my life over and over again, so I myself proposed to my governess that we should drive together.

It happened by chance that she had no shopping to do that day, so she asked where I wished to go.

'Let us go to Serramonte,' I replied.

My last exploit had been to pick up my hero pale and lifeless at the foot of the rocky hill he was striving to climb, in the attempt to plant the banner of the Balducci on the stronghold of the Cecchi. Faust had fallen (for I had pitilessly resolved to sacrifice that noble animal), his dead body saving his master's life by breaking his fall, and I wanted to go and see whether the events I had pictured in my mind and imagination could happen as I had fancied.

However, my proposal did not meet with Mademoiselle's approval; her delight being to drive along the asphalte streets of the town. 'The road is extremely bad and very steep,' she began.

'So much the better, it will make the drive less monotonous,' I replied with singular lack of politeness. 'Then we may perhaps visit the silk factories you are always so anxious to see. Fortunato says the Cecchi have enormous works erected now, and that the factory will bring them in twice as many millions as they had hoped.'

'Count Cecchi has a well-regulated mind,' Mademoiselle replied pompously. 'All his enterprises succeed, because they are well thought out beforehand. He reasons out all his calculations and takes care to provide for every contingency. He leaves nothing to chance; in fact, he knows arithmetic is the base of——'

Here I made my escape as quickly as possible to get my hat, deeply regretting I had ever proposed this drive. I knew from experience that Mademoiselle had the power of spinning out her remarks on this subject indefinitely, but I was quite determined to nip them in the bud. As I was about to get into the carriage, I said very quietly, drawing on my gloves, 'Excuse me for not waiting to hear the end of your remark just now, but it was useless, for I know it by heart. You were going to say that you have the highest opinion of the Cecchi, because they are devoted to arithmetic; in fact, figures are their meat and drink, and they do nothing without having first added it up, subtracted it, multiplied it, divided and then proved it. I also esteem them, and all the more, that I shall never be like them.

You have my leave to praise them as much as you like, but I cannot stand the *arrière pensée* you show so plainly through all your praises, and I earnestly beg of you never to permit yourself to make any allusions to those whose speculations are not successful, because they are not so calculating as these silk merchants——'

Here I stopped, trembling, though I strove to remain calm, in fact I was rather frightened at my own daring, but my blood was up and I was determined to say out all that was in my heart. 'You admire these Cecchi,' I went on, flushed and excited, 'because they spend their lives working like negroes, though their great riches would warrant them in enjoying this world, and you think them much more sensible than my father, whose improvidence and frivolity you are never weary of pointing out to me! This is very wrong of you. He is the only person I care to be like, he, so good and so loving, whose one idea is to make every one happy. If he ruins himself, at least no one else will suffer for it. Everybody is bright and gay at Ventaglia. When the peasants cannot pay their debts, they are only told, 'You must do so next year.' At Serramonte, every one is thin and ill.

They are made to work night and day in the silk factories. The tiny children die, because their mothers have no time to look after them, and when an accident happens in the factory, the poor wounded creature is sent all the way to the hospital at Pistoia; for the Cecchi, with all their millions, never trouble themselves to look after their own sick people—and these are the persons you prefer to my dear father, he, who is so good, so charitable, so devoted!' Here I broke down in a flood of scalding tears.

Mademoiselle, perfectly unmoved, looked at me with an affected expression of patience, and when I grew calm she said in her measured tones: 'My dear child, I have not the slightest idea of the reason which has provoked this unwarrantable explosion of temper on your part. I must point out to you two things. First—you accuse me most unjustly of blaming your father for his conduct; in any case I should never allow myself to do so to you. I know my duty too well, to be guilty of this! Secondly—you take your ideas from the talk of servants, you repeat the coarse accusations of the lower orders who are always ready to misjudge their superiors, and to accuse them of

avarice, harshness, and injustice. Over and over again I have striven to open Count Balducci's eyes to the evil results of your constant association with people beneath you. A well-brought-up girl ought not——'

Here I interrupted her. 'Dear Mademoiselle, you know quite well I am on the high road to becoming a "well-brought-up girl," please do not scold me any more! I will never again say a word against the Cecchi. Forgive me and let us start.' So saying I imprinted a kiss on her thin cheek, and throwing my arm round her waist, I whirled her round in a wild waltz, while she shrieked with fright, as I brought her almost under the hoofs of the horses, who were pawing the gravel in their impatience to be off.

Serramonte is one of the most picturesque of all the castle-crowned heights which are to be found throughout the length and breadth of Tuscany. Like the rest, it testifies to the slight sense of security enjoyed by the inhabitants of this charming country, under a *régime* that compelled them to live in a state of continual watchfulness. The lords of these castles, like the small municipalities, delighted

to quarrel about the veriest trifles; a hasty word, a dead donkey, a stolen dog, a barrel of oil spilt;—the slightest pretext sufficed, without any apparent excuse than the mere love of fighting, and without any other result than constant bloodshed and animosity.

These castles were strongly fortified, and perched on the summit of hills that were protected by strong walls, within whose enclosure nestled the church, the convent, and the offices inhabited by the administrators of the domain. Serramonte presented a perfect type of a feudal Florentine fortress of the thirteenth century, in admirable preservation. The castle was proudly situated on the extreme summit of the hill, which at a distance looked naked and bare, but which was thickly wooded with olive-trees, whose grey dull foliage seemed to take the same tint as that of the grey rocky soil. The towers of the chateau, and the square bell-tower of the church, stood out in clear-cut outlines against the deep blue sky, reminding one of the buildings which Perugino loved to introduce into his landscapes. It was a triumph of the purest style of Perpendicular architecture, lofty, slender, delicate, and most graceful. Such was

Serramonte-Alto, but the Cecchi had not inhabited it for a long time.

In the sixteenth century, when the anxiety for personal security had yielded to the desire of luxury and magnificence, and when splendid villas and sumptuous palaces began to spring up all over Tuscany, the Cecchi built a fine and spacious dwelling for themselves at the foot of the hill. Tradition declared that they had been fired to do this by the desire of eclipsing the richness and beauty of Ventaglia, which the Balducci were at that time rebuilding. Their rivals stole their plans, bribed their workmen, and succeeded in inducing Volterrano to paint the frescoes of their ceilings with his own hand, while those at Ventaglia were entrusted to one of his pupils only, who carried out his master's designs. Added to this, the Cecchi lavishly adorned their halls with magnificent hangings of brocaded silk and cloth of gold, the product of their own looms. The establishment of their silk factories dated from the time of the Medici; all the country from Ventaglia to Pistoia had become their property, and their coat of arms was to be seen on the façade of almost every farmhouse, in the exten-

sive valley of Pescia. Their huge fortune increased every year, owing to their constant improvements, not only in the manufacture of silk, but also in the culture of the silkworms and even of the mulberry-trees.

The present Count Cecchi was a man about sixty, small, withered, grey, hard as a flint, and cold as a serpent. He had two children—a son about thirty, whom I knew slightly, and a daughter whom I had never met. She had been brought up in Rome by her grandmother; her mother dying when she was an infant; people said the poor countess had died from the effects of grief and her husband's cruel treatment.

Though Carlo Cecchi was four or five years younger than my father, he looked a great deal older, in fact he had never been young; from early youth he had been his father's steward and secretary, he managed the factory, and worked from morning till night, as eagerly as if he had to earn his daily bread. Unlike the genial Tuscan manners which create a kind of familiarity without any false pride on the part of the superiors, who know themselves to be nobly born, and are not afraid of compromising

their dignity towards their respectful inferiors, who never think of presuming on their kindness, the Cecchi's behaviour was neither kind nor liberal to their peasants. Hard, grasping, greedy of gain, tenacious in all their dealings, they formed a perfect contrast to my father, and consequently, though they were our nearest neighbours, we had no intercourse with them—it was impossible that any sympathy could exist between my generous-hearted father and such men. I could easily fancy what opinion these Cecchi would have of the charming, amiable gentleman who went on so cheerfully scattering to the winds the wrecks of his dilapidated fortune, and who was ruining himself, as a nobleman and gentleman, as he had done all his life. My father on his part did not hesitate to laugh at the greed for gain displayed by his neighbours, at the old count's hardness, at his sordid meanness, at Carlo's shabby dress (exactly like that of his poorest workmen), and at the life of privation that these two misers led, in their splendid palace, which had no woman's presence to brighten it.

When our carriage stopped at the entrance of the citadel, after having slowly climbed the

road, which wound past terraces of olive-trees and pomegranates in full bloom, the sun had long since sunk below the horizon. The perfume from the jasmine and honey-suckles filled the air, mingled with the scent of flowering bean-fields. We alighted at the entrance of the one street of Serramonte-Alto, which wound along, narrow and twisting, and paved with large blocks of marble, past about fifty dilapidated, irregularly built houses. At the end of this street, which we had to traverse on foot, we came suddenly on to a terrace, with the church on the left and on the right the signorial mansion, its façade adorned with an imposing coat of arms.

I drew near to the dilapidated marble balustrade which formed the terrace, and from the height on which I stood, the landscape stretched out as far as the eye could reach, and was lost in the boundless horizon, giving the spectator the idea of infinitude. The clear fresh air blew right in my face, deliciously cool after the heat of the day, and I drank it in eagerly, my gaze lost in the distant view, which the rays of the sunset seemed to bathe with a golden mist. Against the sky tinted with pale

green, the hills stood out like bronze, their shadows deepening to the hues of purple velvet. The swallows darted and whirled round my head, filling the still, calm silence with their shrill cries.

I experienced a feeling of such intense enjoyment and peace that I longed to linger in that spot, quite forgetful of Mademoiselle's existence. Leaning over the broken balustrade, I examined the narrow stony path below, which at one turn was broken by rocky boulders, at another by a grotesquely twisted olive, or a wild fig-tree springing up in its very midst. It was plain I should have to alter my story, for at no time could this goat-path have been practicable to any steed less winged than the fiery Pegasus, which my imagination bestrode. Leaning on the balustrade with my chin in my hands, I wandered off into fairy-land, when suddenly Mademoiselle Fournier's voice recalled me to my senses. I heard her apologising in vile Italian to some one for disturbing her.

An intensely sweet voice, whose tones fell like music on the ear, answered her in excellent French. 'A visit here is too rare a pleasure

not to be highly appreciated. I only regret that I do not know to whom I have the honour of speaking.'

Mademoiselle gave her own name, and no doubt pointed me out, for I heard the voices coming nearer. I turned round reluctantly and as slowly as possible, for I was just at the most critical period in a balcony scene very similar to the one in *Romeo and Juliet.* A pair of large, calm, deep-set eyes of a grey blue, that in this light seemed black, met my gaze. They were wide open, and their size was increased by the shadows thrown by a rather high forehead, from the temples of which the hair was brushed straight back, and then knotted very low in a coil on the neck. The reddened eyelids seemed as if they were only too well used to tears, but at first I realised nothing but these deep-set eyes which were fixed on me. Without having a word to say, I at first stood and gazed at the charming countenance, lit up by these dark orbs, which made me feel as if I had before me a saint or the Madonna herself. A sad little curve in the upper lip, a smile of quiet gentle sadness—and then! in an instant, without a moment's hesitation, I yielded to my girlish

impulses (be it remembered, I was only fourteen) and I raised my lips to give and receive a kiss. Instead of taking the little delicate hand that was held out to me, I flung my two arms round the neck of Beata Cecchi, for so I guessed the stranger at once to be, though I had never seen her before. She seemed rather startled at first, but then she gently returned my kiss, and pressed me almost convulsively to her breast, like a person who was famishing for lack of affection. 'Palma,' scolded Mademoiselle Fournier, 'what a liberty! You must excuse her, Signorina, she is at an age——'

'When one only listens to one's heart,' broke in Beata. 'Ah, Mademoiselle, if her heart turns to me, do not forbid her to listen to it. You do not know what it is to me, to receive any love or even the simplest mark of sympathy.'

I noticed that she wore a long black dress without any ornament whatever.

'You are in mourning,' I cried, 'and you do look so sad. I should so like to comfort you.'

'Kind little heart,' she said, bending over me with a look of tenderness that lit up her whole face, 'you have done so already, Carina,

by the sympathy you have shown me and the kiss you gave me just now.'

'Yes,' she continued, turning to Mademoiselle, 'I *am* very sad and very lonely. I had the grief of losing my dear and saintly grandmother a month ago. She brought me up—and I had to leave Rome, and say farewell to all the friends of my childhood, and since then I have lived here quite alone. But forgive me! I am keeping you both standing, talking about myself. Though I know your visit was not intended for me, as of course you did not know I was here, you will kindly allow me to make the most of so rare a pleasure.' Speaking thus, she led the way to a corner of the terrace, where some chairs stood under the shade of a group of ancient orange-trees planted in enormous pots of terra-cotta bearing the Cecchi escutcheon.

She seated us in these chairs and sat herself on the balustrade with her back to the view. Her fine profile, delicate as that of a mediæval saint, stood out dark and clear against the pale horizon. I watched her closely while she was talking to Mademoiselle Fournier, as there was something in her appearance which attracted

me immensely. In fact she exercised such a fascination over me that I could not take my eyes off her. She was tall, slender, very slow and calm in her movements. She looked as if she was always wrapped in contemplation, and was like a nun who had for the moment cast aside her veil. She sat, as they do in convents, straight upright, without the least stoop, her hands motionless and crossed on her knees. The violence with which she had strained me to her heart contrasted strangely with her usual calmness of manner.

Mademoiselle Fournier inquired if she did not feel very isolated at the top of this hill, after the life she had passed in Rome,—the difference must be very great. 'Yes,' she replied, 'she was very lonely, but she was grateful to her father for settling her at Serra-monte-Alto, rather than at the factory below, the air on this height was so pure and fresh.'

'Still,' persisted Mademoiselle Fournier, 'you must be very lonely; it is a sad life for a young girl of your age.'

'Serious,' she replied, 'serious perhaps, but not sad. I am so seldom alone. Every one around me is poor and needs help and care.

In the *curé* I have found more than a friend, he is so clever and has such an excellent library. He has kindly consented to give me the lessons I need to finish my education, and Carlo comes often to see me.'

She forced herself to smile as she uttered these words, but spite of the gathering darkness I could see that tears were trembling on her eyelashes. The contrast between these tears and the reserve and moderation of her words, struck me greatly. 'You would like to persuade us that you are very happy in this roosting place of owls and swallows,' I said with the bluntness of a hoyden. 'But you see you do not know how to tell a falsehood,' and I touched with the tip of my finger a tear that had just fallen on the folds of her mourning dress. She only answered by a smile, and drawing me towards her, pressed her lips to my forehead.

But suddenly she stopped, listening to the sound of approaching footsteps and voices, then pushing me from her, she knitted her brows with an almost stern expression.

Two men came towards us on the terrace—one was Carlo, whom I should have taken for a workman from his dress; the other was much

taller and stouter, and manifestly a German. He had a large, rather handsome head with fair hair, set on a pair of square shoulders, and over his broad chest flowed a long reddish beard. Stiff and cold, his steely glance made me shiver in the twilight.

'My brother Carlo whom you have not met before, and Monsieur Mohrenstein,' said Beata in her clear tones.

The German bowed low, and then rose again as if he had been moved by springs. Carlo Cecchi stared at me with his little black eyes, as piercing as gimlets, but he evidently thought I was a little girl not yet worth the trouble of speaking to seriously, so he immediately began a conversation with Mademoiselle Fournier, which soon grew very lively and animated. She made him give her the most precise details as to the management of the works, the spinning and weaving of the silk, and said that she had heard they were establishing new chemical dye-works.

'Doubtless those immense buildings, which we admired at the foot of the hill and which are not yet finished, are intended for this new branch.'

'Exactly so—and Monsieur Mohrenstein is the manager of our new works.'

'It must be a very interesting business,' replied Mademoiselle; and turning to the German, she made him give her the most minute details respecting his work. He answered her questions in the most extraordinary jargon of French and Italian together, each as detestable as the other. As for me, I could not take my eyes off Beata, so entirely had she fascinated me. Almost involuntarily I rose and seated myself by her side on the balustrade, slipping my hand into hers. There was something so calm, so pathetic in her attitude that it sent a thousand wild ideas surging through my brain.

Turning to me as she gently stroked my hand, she said, 'All these details and figures do not appear to interest you much.'

'Not the least in the world. But one thing I do understand—Mademoiselle Fournier, who has been dying to see your factory, has got herself invited to go over it next Wednesday. I am heartily glad, for then I shall see you again.'

'I never go down to the factory,' she said, 'but I will try—I mean, I will do all in my

power to join you there. I should be so pleased to meet you again.'

'And then you will come to Ventaglia, will you not? I have so many things to say to you and to show you!'

'I never pay any visits,' she replied, 'but perhaps I may be allowed——' here she checked herself, adding, 'to make this exception.'

We did not return home till starlight that evening, and in the carriage Mademoiselle remarked, 'What a real pleasure it is to converse with such clever, distinguished people! That Monsieur Mohrenstein is a man of great learning, quite a *savant* in fact.'

I did not answer her a word, the truth being, I had taken one of my violent antipathies to him, antipathies which were as deep and spontaneous as my infatuations.

'As for Count Carlo,' she continued, 'I do hope, my child, that your absurd prejudices will not prevent your doing justice to his great qualities. It is most unusual in a young man of that age, to meet with so much judgment, so much——' But I listened no further, my imagination was busy weaving strange visions, in which Monsieur Mohrenstein played the part

of ogre and my heroine assumed the figure and features of Beata Cecchi.

I eagerly narrated all the events of the afternoon to Generosa, as she was helping me to undress that night, and as soon as she saw the interest I took in Beata, she lost no time in collecting from her numerous acquaintances copious information, more or less correct, respecting all that went on at Serramonte. Thus I learnt, for the first time, that Beata was intensely unhappy. Her father and brother, it appeared, had made up their minds that she was to inherit the large fortune of her maternal grandmother, who had brought her up. Instead of this, her grandmother only bequeathed to her the small country house near Rome, where she had spent all her early life, and the Cecchi visited on the unfortunate girl all the weight of their anger, consequent on this disappointment of their hopes.

There was no persecution nor annoyance which she did not suffer at their hands. According to Generosa, old Cecchi carried his avarice so far as to measure out all that she ate or drank. She never came down from Serramonte-Alto unless accompanied by Carlo, and

she had positively no one with her, save an old German *bonne* who could not speak a word of Italian. Besides all this, the Cecchi were determined to make her marry a Jew, the manager of their new dye-works. In vain she wept and besought that she might be spared this—nothing moved the stern will of her father.

'But they will have to make haste if they want this marriage to come off,' added Generosa.

'Why?' I asked.

'Why! because if she has a farthing's worth of courage, she won't remain long in that owl's nest up there.'

'But what can she do?' I inquired.

'Per Bacco! let herself be carried off, of course, and I, for one, would help her all I could.'

'So would I,' I thought. 'But who is to carry her off, Generosa?'

'Some one is always ready to carry off a pretty girl! There would not be any difficulty about that, I can tell you. Besides, I hear her grandmother wanted her very much to marry a young man, a friend of hers in Rome, but as he has no fortune the Cecchi won't even hear his

name mentioned. They have even warned the Signorina that if he dares to show his face in the neighbourhood, they will kill him, and they are just the men to do it too. And they will kill her as well, they are on the high road to it! The poor thing is so thin and pale, that she can't last much longer, if they go on tormenting her as they are doing. Peccato! There will not be a fire in hell hot enough to punish those cursed Cecchi!'

All this was as oil poured on the white-heat of my imagination, and from henceforth I pictured Beata with her head encircled by a martyr's crown.

She was not at the factory when we went to see it. To Mademoiselle Fournier this was a memorable day, for the old Count himself did the honours of Serramonte, and took the trouble to explain everything to her respecting his machines. He received us alone, and did not even deign to notice my presence. It struck me he watched Mademoiselle closely—doubtless he saw charms in her which attracted him, for towards the end of the visit he became quite confidential to her.

'He was,' he said, 'greatly dissatisfied with

the education Beata had received from her late grandmother, who had filled her head with romantic fancies, directly opposed to his own. She had made her an enthusiast, entirely deficient in all practical useful knowledge.'

'He was not accustomed to young girls,' he said, 'and Beata's ideas irritated him; besides, he had no time to trouble himself about her. Now that Providence had thrown Mademoiselle in his path, he felt she was a person eminently fitted to exercise a good influence over his daughter, and he besought her to be good enough to take an interest in her, to watch over her, and to give her some good advice, especially now that Count Balducci's absence would naturally leave her with more time at her own disposal.'

I knew Mademoiselle Fournier well enough to divine what was passing through her mind during this studied discourse. Her imagination was even more active than mine, and I felt certain she already saw herself installed as the mistress of Serramonte. She bridled, and bowed, seeking in vain to hide the involuntary smile of satisfaction that played round her thin lips. She spoke of Beata as 'that dear child,' and

promised to do all in her power, by her affection and her advice, to make up to her for the mother she had lost. I do not know what effect this indiscreet speech made on Count Cecchi, but I distinctly saw a twinkle in the corner of his little ferrety eyes.

The first time Beata came to Ventaglia, Carlo accompanied her. Mademoiselle was so eloquent, that I think she overshot the mark, for Carlo, who said very little, seemed quite overwhelmed and never repeated his visit.

When Mademoiselle Fournier noticed that the Cecchi no longer accompanied Beata to Ventaglia, she grew much less eager about giving her good advice. She treated the fat German, who always escorted her mistress, with the utmost scorn. This stranger was a substantial kind of Generosa, filling an intermediate position between a governess and a maid. She wore a brown straw hat with a terrible bunch of forget-me-nots, and thread mittens. Mademoiselle never even deigned to offer her a chair; but, without being the least out of countenance, Fräulein sank into the corner of a sofa, drew a sock from her pocket and began to knit, looking fixedly before her

with her pale blue eyes and white eyelashes. I longed to have Beata all to myself, and I therefore proposed that we should go and sit under the orange-trees on the terrace. Mademoiselle Fournier at once excused herself, pleading a headache, which she said the outer glare and the heat would certainly increase. The German sat riveted to the sofa, and I drew Beata towards a grove of laurels which in spring-time was filled with the nests of nightingales and redwings. Between two young girls an intimacy springs up very quickly. I had always fancied that if I could once find myself alone with Beata, I should have a thousand things to say to her, but now that my dream was realised, I stood before her dumb, confused, incapable of uttering a word.

I had never felt for any woman before, the feelings she awakened in me. She seemed to give a tangible shape and form to the ideal that had floated dreamily through my brain so long. She struck me as perfect in every way; her striking beauty, her alabaster complexion, even the severe style of her dress—which I resolved to imitate: I studied her dignified movements, her slow way of speaking, her

nun-like manners. She flashed upon me, just at the moment when I was on the borderland of maidenhood, seeking for some model on which to form myself, and it seemed to me impossible to find one more absolutely perfect than she was. I longed to speak to her, but I did not know how to begin; I longed to open my whole heart to her, but yet I had not the courage to reveal to her the cherished dreams that filled it.

I felt that to her I must appear a perfect child, that by a word or a smile she would relegate to their proper place all my beloved visions, that she would probably treat as childish nonsense that which at present absorbed my whole life. Perhaps she would blame me for allowing myself to be led away by my imagination, as I constantly did. And yet, the story I had heard from Generosa returned to my memory, and I said to myself that spite of Beata's outward calm and nun-like manners, she must have had the same dreams as I had. Without doubt, even she had met her hero, her ideal (whether an officer or not, mattered little), who had made her heart beat as mine did.

Was she my age when he first appeared? I wondered, and suddenly I became aware I was thinking aloud, and that almost in spite of myself, I asked her point-blank: 'Beata, when you were my age, had you met the hero of your dreams?'

She started and looked at me with eyes wide opened in her surprise.

'What!' she said, 'what an extraordinary question!'

Then bending over me, she took my face between her two hands, looked intently into my troubled eyes, and pushing the waving hair from my temples, kissed me on my forehead, which was covered with blushes.

'What ideas to have in this little head, only fourteen years old!' she said slowly. 'Poor little girl! your little heart is burning to pour out your secret into mine, but I will not receive your confidences, you will be very sorry some day that you ever made them. At your age impressions change so quickly!'

'Mine never will,' I said decidedly.

'You think so,' she said softly. 'Do you know that in the very act of telling me all that is now passing through your heart and brain,

you would find your ideas change? The very words, while giving shape and form to what is probably only a freak of your imagination, would so change your impressions, that you would scarcely recognise them as your own. If you had a mother it would be right to tell her everything, positively everything, but who am I that I should have your confessions? I am as yet only a stranger to you.'

'You are,' I burst out enthusiastically, 'the best, the most perfect being I have ever met.'

'You think so? and yet you scarcely know me! Poor Palma, poor warm-hearted, tender, little soul! Oh, that you might always remain as you are now! But no; you must pass through the terrible mysterious struggle of life, when you will have to battle against so much deception, so much selfishness, falsehood, base and interested designs! Would that I could warn you, arm you for the fight. But this may not be—the experience of others rarely helps us. Each one of us must fight against the obstacles that oppose us. It must be! it is necessary! it is the lesson we must all try to learn! all! all!'

'No! no!' I cried hastily. 'I am not going

to allow myself to be crushed, broken, bruised, as you say. I am, on the contrary, quite certain I am going to be very happy. All women are not doomed to be victims, as you seem to think. I know some who are very gay and very happy.'

'I hope you may be one of their number, but do you believe they have always been happy? that they will always be so?'

'Some of them will, certainly,' I replied.

'The selfish ones,' she murmured softly. 'Those who have the courage to shut their eyes to the suffering that surrounds them, those whose hearts are only filled with vanity and frivolity.'

'No Beata,' I answered very gravely. 'I do not envy the happiness of such. I envy those who love intensely and are loved in return—those are the happy ones.'

She laid her finger on my lips. 'Hush, *ragazza!* (little girl) you are much too young to be thinking of such matters. You should be busy with your lessons, your play. At your age I still played with my doll. Have you any dolls?'

'Hundreds, but I always detested them.

They are so stupid with their great round eyes, and their perpetual smile. When I was little, I used to break their heads to punish them for never getting into a temper, and never kissing me of their own accord. I love dogs much better, and above all——'

'What?'

'Little children. I dote on them.'

'Really! I am not surprised, I love them dearly too; when you come to see me in my fortress up there, I will show you my own little children.'

I looked at her with such amazement that I brought a bewitching smile to her lips. 'I have a great many up there,' she continued. 'Ten —twelve—I wash them, and dress them and play with them. Come and see them.'

'I understand now,' I replied; 'you mean the children of those poor people who live in the old hovels at Serramonte-Alto. People say they are all beggars up there.'

She nodded an assent. 'They are indeed the poorest people of the neighbourhood. They have no land of their own. Those men and women who are able to work, go down every morning to the factory. The only ones who

stay up are the little tiny children, the sick, and the old.'

'And you are the guardian angel of all these poor creatures; I guess it!'

'I wish to be, but what I can do is so insufficient. Perhaps—later——'

At this moment the bell at the entrance gate rang loudly, but I paid no heed, for, during my father's absence, visitors were not admitted. A gardener, however, brought me a card which he had just received, and I read on it a name that was quite unknown to me.

'The Marquis Mario Arsina,' I read aloud. 'I do not know him,' but suddenly I felt a burning blush spreading over my forehead and cheeks. Why, I should have found it hard to say, only at the bottom of this stranger's card I perceived the words 'Captain of Cavalry.'

Could it be my blue officer? I did not dare to look at Beata, for I was sure she would read my secret at the first glance. It was she who spoke to the gardener. 'Have you informed this officer that Count Balducci is absent?' she inquired.

'I have, but it is for Signorina Palma that he asks.'

She seemed annoyed; then turning to me with as much authority as if she had been at home—'Palma,' she said, 'I will receive the Marchese Arsina, while you will go and inform Mademoiselle Fournier and bring her here.'

I asked nothing better than to escape—I, who had dreamt of no greater happiness than that of meeting my officer again! I now was seized with a feeling of downright terror at the mere thought of his being there. I longed to hide myself, to creep into the earth. I had never before known what it was to be shy, but now I felt awkward and clumsy. I was brusque in my movements, and ready to cry, for I felt instinctively that my trembling, agitated manner must produce on him a deplorable impression. When I returned to the laurel grove, escorted by Mademoiselle Fournier, Beata and the officer were talking rapidly, like people who had known each other well.

It was indeed my officer! the hero of all my dreams and romances, he whose dark eyes had haunted me from the day we first met. But I sought in vain for the kind, winning expression he had then; he looked annoyed and stern, almost hard, and he bit his lips under his

black moustache. I imagined that he wanted to see me alone, and that he was put out at seeing me approach under the ægis of Mademoiselle: I flattered myself that the episode of our meeting under the cherry-tree had left indelible traces on his memory. He did not make the slightest allusion to it, however, and in my simplicity I admired his tact, and was grateful for it.

'I have taken the liberty of calling,' he said, 'because I have just returned from Florence, where I had the privilege of seeing Princess Landi.' He stopped, and I waited, expecting some message from my old aunt, but no, that was all, and it was plainly an awkward excuse in explanation of his visit.

My poor heart beat as if it would burst; it whispered to me that the only reason that had brought Mario Arsina was the desire of seeing me again. He had had plainly no difficulty in finding out who I was. If he had found me alone he would have told me—and then I whispered to myself what he would have said, whilst trembling with nervousness I pulled to pieces the fan which I held in my hand, to give me the confidence I so needed.

I left the burden of the conversation to Beata and Mademoiselle Fournier, perfectly contented to listen to the tones of my hero's voice. His visit was soon over, and when he rose to take leave, Mademoiselle Fournier led him to the stables, where Faust awaited him. I crept up to Beata and laid my burning brow on her shoulder. 'Beata,' I whispered, 'you would not let me speak just now, but I must tell you the truth.'

'What is it, *chérie?*' she said rather distractedly.

'I love Mario Arsina!' I stammered out.

She started violently. 'What!' she exclaimed. 'You are mad! What are you saying? Why, you have only known him this last half-hour; you did not even know his name.'

'I did not know his name, Beata, but I knew him,' and then I poured out the story of our first meeting, and told her it was I who had shown him the path to Serramonte-Alto.

She listened in silence, then pressed me to her heart, and I felt she was trembling like a leaf. She let me finish my tale, then whispered in my ear: 'Listen to me, Palma, you must forget all this. It is childish folly. You are

far too young to have such ideas. Promise me that you will do your very best to drive them out of your head. Watch over your imagination, darling. Keep your heart untouched for him with whom you are destined to pass your life. You will meet him, believe me, at the very moment ordained by Providence. You will rejoice then to bring him your fresh young heart with its first love. Believe me, Palma, and drive away all these dangerous, unhealthy fancies from your mind. You must forget Mario Arsina.'

'But if Providence has decreed that he is just the one who is to share my life, do you not think it will be a great joy to be able to tell him some day that my heart was given to him from the hour we first met?'

'If he be the one,' she repeated. 'Yes, yes, you are right—it may be so.' And she put her hands to her forehead and pressed her temples tightly.

'It may be so,' she repeated. 'But Palma, I am rather tired. I have stayed too late. I must go home.'

'Beata,' I cried, 'you are ill! what is the matter? you are so pale!'

'Nothing! nothing! leave me and be kind enough to order the carriage and call Fräulein. I am subject to these attacks; ever since I had Roman fever I am liable to them. I assure you it is nothing, and I shall be all right to-morrow.'

The day's events had thrown me into such a state of trouble and excitement, that Generosa noticed it at once. She shook her head sadly as she undressed me that night. 'They have quite changed my *bambina*,' she murmured, 'quite changed her! She is growing as sad as the Signorina up above.'

'No, Generosa, never fear! On the contrary, I am going to be very happy and bright, happier than I have ever been. Only you will be very good and climb up to Serramonte-Alto to-morrow, and bring me back news of the Signorina Beata, she was quite ill to-day.'

'I am not surprised at that. I only wonder she is still alive. Each morning old Cecchi sends her her food for the day; he himself weighs out the sugar and the bread, and counts the eggs. She deprives herself of everything to give to the poor creatures up there. If that fat German could speak anything but her own diabolical language, she would have plenty to

tell me, I know. They say the Signorina is half starved.'

'All right, Generosa, you have told me that before,' I said impatiently, for I longed to get rid of her, and spite of Beata's wise advice, to go over in my memory every hour of that eventful day.

Beata sent next day to thank me for my inquiries. She had quite recovered, and she would soon come to assure me of this herself.

'Something fresh has happened up at the old castle,' Generosa said a few days after. As she was certain of my deepest interest, she spared neither details nor epithets in relating to me what she called 'the scandal at Serramonte.' It appeared that the old Count Cecchi had never been to see his daughter from the day he had placed her in her dungeon home. But he suddenly resolved to go up to Serramonte-Alto to make sure that certain repairs were urgently required, for want of which, the architect had warned him, the old feudal stronghold would crumble to the ground at the slightest shock of an earthquake.

He found Beata, who had not had any notice of his visit, seated by the pallet of a poor girl

whom she had brought to the room adjoining the one she herself occupied. She was a factory girl, who had had her arm badly crushed in one of the machines.

'Is this a hospital?' growled her father, as he stalked out of the room without addressing a word to his daughter. He went up to the floor above to examine the cracks he had been warned about, entered a vast room, which in former times had been used as a lumber room, and found himself face to face with six old women, who were spinning and knitting round a stove, on which one of their number, exactly like one of the witches in *Macbeth*, was baking a cake of polenta. All the old bodies welcomed him with their most gracious smiles, and invited him to share in their feast.

He turned on them with a look as black as thunder. 'What are you doing here?' he asked sternly.

They stared at him stupefied. 'But—but we are at home,' answered the bravest of the party. 'The Signorina Beata——' With a fearful oath he flung out of the room and dashed downstairs, but at the last step he nearly fell. A small child was seated on it with an old

straw hat on his lap, filled with raw beans, which he was munching with keen enjoyment.

'Cursed imp,' shouted the Count in exasperation, and sent him flying with a kick. The child let his hat fall, scattering the beans all over the floor, then thrust his two fists into his eyes and howled at the top of his voice.

Instantly a dozen little brats like himself ran up, leaving a huge bowl of chestnut porridge, round which they had been seated, still holding their pewter spoons in their dirty little hands, with their mouths all smeared over, and their eyes dilated with amazement.

'What business have you here? you young vagabonds,' cried the *padrone* in a towering rage. 'Who gave you leave to come into this palace with your fleas and your——'

'Signorina Beata,' murmured a little girl. Ah me! Within an hour's time the poor wounded girl had been despatched to the hospital at Pistoia, the children driven out and forbidden ever to cross the threshold again, while the poor old women, who were all homeless paupers, crept slowly down the hill through the blinding dust, their staff in their hand and their bundles on their back, and Beata, left

utterly alone with the stout German, wept as though her very heart would break—according to Generosa.

This story threw me into a state of violent indignation. I longed to see Beata, to express my intense sympathy; and I expected to see her arrive at Ventaglia excited, indignant, in open rebellion as I myself was, or perhaps cast down, discouraged, and looking like an unjustly persecuted victim. She came to see me next day, calm, and smiling; sweeter, and more loving than before.

I drew her at once to the laurel grove, eager to find myself quite alone with her, and I seated myself at her feet on the mossy carpet, which was as thick and soft as velvet.

'Well!' I said eagerly, fixing my eyes on her pale face with its sweet smile.

'Well!' she replied. 'What new idea is running in that little head of yours now?'

'A great many evil things. Anger, indignation, intense sympathy, and a desire—ah! a burning desire to comfort you, to tell you how I pity——'

She looked uneasy, and a cloud passed over her brow. 'Why do you want to comfort me?'

she asked quickly. 'What are you alluding to? I must know.'

'Why! because of the great trial you have just had. It was cruel, wicked to deprive you of your one pleasure, you, who lead such a sad life up above.'

'What are you talking about?' she asked rather impatiently. 'Who are they that busy themselves so about what goes on at Serramonte?'

'Oh! everybody,' I replied. 'They are indignant that those poor creatures you so delighted in, should have been driven out; all those children you loved so!'

She gave a sigh of relief. 'Oh! is that all?' she asked. 'And it is that which excites you so much, *chérie?* Yes, it is true I was rather distressed at first, for I was tenderly attached to my poor people. But that is no reason why you should get into such a state, Palma. My father was perfectly right. I had acted without his authority. I had really no right to fill his house with sick people and paupers without his permission.'

I looked at her with intense astonishment. 'How calmly you take things, Beata,' I said.

full of admiration. 'How good, and sweet, and resigned you are! You are a perfect saint. In your place, I should have been as furious as a wild cat. I should have protested, sworn, said all manner of bitter things; I should have fought some one or other, or I should have thrown myself out of the window in despair.'

She smiled. 'I should perhaps have longed to do so too, if such a thing had happened to me when I was your age.'

'And do you think I shall ever become as good as you are, Beata?'

She made a gesture deprecating this praise. 'Hush!' she said gently. 'It is I who, on the contrary, would like to imitate you, with your straightforwardness, your frankness, your freedom from all dissimulation. Ah! Carina, you are fortunate in having nothing to conceal.'

'Beata,' I asked, slightly embarrassed, 'were you always as gentle, as resigned, as obedient, even when—even if——'

'If what?' she said, softly stroking my hair.

'Well!' I said, taking my courage in both hands 'if—if—your father ordered you to marry some one, who—who——'

I felt the hand she had laid on my head tremble.

'To marry Monsieur Mohrenstein,' she said very quietly, 'that is what you mean, is it not? I see you are well informed, and that every one in the neighbourhood is very busy about all that goes on at Serramonte. It is quite natural,' she said, as if speaking to herself, 'everything is known, and family secrets always end in becoming public property. Yes, Palma,' she went on after a moment's silence, and she bent over me and looked me straight in the eyes, 'I *am* to marry Monsieur Mohrenstein, but you are wrong in thinking that my father's commands compel me to do so. I am going to marry him of my own free will.'

I was utterly confounded by her calm and confident tone.

'I congratulate you then,' I said, in great confusion. 'He is all very well—only——'

'Only what?' she said, as she seemed to read my innermost thoughts.

'I thought he was a Jew,' I stammered out at last.

'He was one,' she replied, with her lips

somewhat compressed, 'but he has been baptized that he might marry me, and I cannot but feel grateful to him for this great proof of—of esteem. He is very rich and much liked by my father and Carlo, whose partner he now is; he has risked much of his capital in the concerns of the firm, and he is very clever, especially in chemistry. He is very generous too, and will, I believe, settle on me a sufficiently large allowance to let me act liberally towards the poor and the wretched, which is just what I have always longed for. Come now, little romantic creature, confess—do I look like a victim dragged to the altar by a cruel father? What could you require more?'

'Only one thing,' I whispered. 'That you were in love with this Monsieur Mohrenstein—but—you do not love him.'

'What do you know about it? who told you so?'

'Only your own expression when I saw you together on the terrace at Serramonte-Alto, that evening when the swallows were making such a noise, and Mademoiselle Fournier made your brother tell her exactly how many yards of silk thread his machines turned out every

day. It did not matter to me one bit, so I watched you, and I noticed that you frowned every time you saw Mr. Mohrenstein's light eyes gazing at you. I must say he never took them off you. He has evidently very good taste, and thinks you beautiful. But you are ever so much too beautiful for him, Beata, *mia!*' I cried with a passionate impulse. 'You do not love him! Confess that you do not love him! confess that you do not care for him! I know it, it is useless trying to deceive me. You are going to marry him from a feeling of duty, of obedience, I can't tell what—perhaps to mortify yourself, for you are a saint, and then you will be miserable for the rest of your life. And then, as we cannot live without loving some one, you will one day come across some person whom you will really like, and you will fall in love with him, though you are a saint, and then you will regret you never did, what Generosa says you ought to do—never let yourself be carried off!'

She rose and stood towering above me. In her long, black nun-like garments, she looked so tall, and so majestic, that I drew back involuntarily, terrified at my own daring.

'Child! How dare you speak to me so?' she said very severely—'be silent,' and she turned from me, walking away with her hands tightly locked together, and I—I remained rooted to the spot, hesitating and ashamed of my rash words, for I saw I had wounded her deeply. She came back to me, however, bent over me, threw her arms round me, raised me, and made me sit down by her on the marble bench and drew my head down to her breast.

'I was wrong, *chérie*,' she said very tenderly, 'I gave way to my temper, but it grieves me to hear you discussing things that are quite unsuited to your years. You must not concern yourself about it at all, Palma. You are just at the age when you ought to be learning, arming yourself for the future, preparing to fulfil its duties by study, by reading, by solid instruction, and it appears to me you are doing nothing of the kind. Come now, let me see how far advanced you are.'

She then questioned me closely about my studies, my reading, gave me advice, and ended by inspiring me with an ardent wish to fill up the terrible gaps in my education.

She succeeded in doing what Mademoiselle

Fournier had never been able to accomplish. She drew up a regular plan of work, which I promised her to carry out faithfully, and from that day I worked a great deal more and dreamed far less. At every visit she paid me, Beata put me through a kind of examination on what I had studied and read since we last met. I was amazed at her learning, for she had read much and thought deeply. She had a way of presenting study to me under a perfectly original and fresh aspect, which made the driest work interesting to me.

Now that our conversations had a definite object, which my reading prepared me for beforehand, they no longer turned on personal matters, and I was struck by the extreme care she took in avoiding all reference to the confidences I had made to her.

Beata soon attained complete ascendency over me, and I willingly yielded to her influence in everything. Her great superiority dazzled me, and blinded me to any faults she might have had; but though I watched her closely I was never able to discover even a shadow of imperfection in her character. Her pure and striking personal beauty was evidently only the

reflex of the spotless beauty of her soul. One thing alone distressed me in her—the ease with which she permitted her father to dispose of her person, and her whole life. It seemed to me that she carried the duty of filial submission too far, when she consented to marry Monsieur Mohrenstein. Hitherto my only friends had been young girls of my own age, for among all the young women in my father's circle of friends, no one had ever troubled herself to take any interest in what was passing in my mind or my heart. One alone, the Princess Dell' Orso, had attempted to win my confidence, but I received her advances in such a way, that no doubt she was discouraged, for she never renewed them. I did not like her, and I was instinctively jealous of the intimacy that existed between my father and herself.

It was Beata really who first penetrated to the inner sanctuary of my affections. I loved her with that passionate, exaggerated intensity which is usual in all youthful friendships. If she had chosen to give me bad advice, or some absurd command, I should have obeyed her blindly, for I was as melted wax in her hands. If she had striven to exercise over me an evil

influence or urged me to wrongdoing, I should not have offered the least resistance. Thanks to the education I had hitherto received, my moral sense had never been aroused. I was honest by instinct, straightforward and frank by nature, generous from habit, incapable of falsehood or deceit, simply because it had never entered my mind to be guilty of either. But any sudden temptation would have found me quite unarmed, my ideas of good and evil being absolutely vague and purely instinctive.

As for my religion! it was merely a reflection of that of Mademoiselle Fournier and Generosa. The one had inculcated a single sentiment, the fear of hell, and a fixed resolve to avoid it if possible; the other had trained me in a regular and mathematical fulfilment of all the ordinances of the church. According to Mademoiselle, salvation was a boon to be won by not neglecting any of the indispensable means of gaining it; but she considered anything beyond this as useless and superfluous.

Beata was the first to awaken in my heart a sense of the need of real religion, and make me realise deeply the insufficiency of the motives by which I had been hitherto guided. She

first opened up to me the sublime beauties of the Gospel, which to her were as necessary daily food. When she spoke of the Saviour's love, her beautiful face shone, and an expression of ecstasy came over it which took away my breath, and almost terrified me.

Her pallor, the attenuated lines of her figure, made her look like one of those saintly figures the Umbrian school of painters delighted to depict. The burning fervour of her piety seemed to me as if it must consume her fragile frame, and by the power of this piety she imbued me with a desire to imitate her and become as saintly. Thus my ideal was transformed completely. I was careful to banish from my heart every thought of Mario Arsina; my dreams now were of ecstasies and miracles: I passed hours in the church, and in the middle of the night I rose to pray.

Mademoiselle Fournier suddenly found in me a most attentive, docile pupil. I was as clever as the generality of girls, and I soon made rapid progress, and began to redeem lost time. Naturally she took to herself all the merit of this change, but she was less delighted than I expected;—for spite of her violent pro-

testations and her eloquent reproaches, she fully appreciated the advantages which accrued to her from my wandering, independent life. Since my father had no objection to my escapades, her conscience could not reproach her, nay, these very escapades left her free to pass the greater part of the day in pleasing idleness. Now, however, she was obliged to correct my exercises and my mathematics, besides superintending my piano studies, and though this was a triumph for her, it brought her but little satisfaction.

The summer was now drawing to its close: birds no longer sang in my favourite grove of laurels, and the heavy clusters of grapes hung on the vines, waiting for the vintage. My father wrote to say it was impossible for him to visit Ventaglia that year, for he was at Bayreuth, and constantly in the society of Wagner. From thence he intended to go to Rome to visit Liszt. He arranged to meet me there with Mademoiselle Fournier and Generosa, and we were to winter together in the Eternal City. He wrote that he was absorbed in music, as he had been studying it seriously all the past summer, and he was writing the score of an opera which

he intended to bring out at Florence or Bologna as soon as it was finished. I had therefore only a few days more to spend at Ventaglia, and though I was delighted at the prospect of seeing my father again, my heart ached at the thought of leaving Beata! I wondered how I could possibly live without her, and I told her so the first time we met after I had received my father's letter. She had changed the way of doing her hair that day, and had wound the thick plait round the top of her head, instead of coiling it up tightly at the back, low on her neck, and this made her look quite beautiful. Seated in my favourite place at her feet, I was never weary of looking at the sweet, pure face as it bent over me.

'How lovely you are, Beata,' I burst out almost involuntarily. She made a gesture of annoyance.

'Yes, you *are* beautiful,' I persisted, 'though you are, it seems, vexed that I should tell you so, and that way of doing your hair suits you to perfection. No ornament could suit you so well as that plait of your magnificent hair, it is a crown worthy of a queen. But—what are you doing?' With a quick movement she had

pulled down the heavy coil, and with her two hands she was smoothing her hair tightly back off her face.

'Oh! Beata,' I cried, 'is it wrong then to be pretty and to adorn oneself a little? No! it is quite ridiculous to do as you are doing now. Though I try to imitate you in everything, and though I have only one wish, to become as good and perfect as you are, I cannot admire what you are doing at this present moment. If you are so anxious to hide your hair, why not cut it quite short like a nun?'

'You are right,' she answered rather nervously, 'it is very heavy and makes my head ache.'

'Not at all,' I persisted, 'and you are not speaking the truth—it is superb, and it made you look too pretty when you had it done like a crown a minute ago, and you do not care to be too beautiful, it annoys you. You would like to be as ugly as I am. You would rather no one troubled about you or noticed you. You would prefer that Monsieur Mohrenstein should not delight to stare at you as he does, devouring you with his great oyster-coloured eyes——'

A vivid blush mounted to her temples, and she suddenly pressed me close to her, for at

times she did yield to impulses of tenderness, which contrasted strangely with her extremely calm manner.

'Terrible little girl,' she said, smiling and confused. 'If instead of always concerning yourself about what I think and do, you would force yourself to read the heart that beats in your own breast, so that you might learn to direct it aright and keep it from wandering wherever the whim takes it——'

'It is quite useless, Beata, now that you are there to direct it. I have only to follow you, who are so good and perfect.'

'You think so, *poverina!*' she said. 'And what will you do when we are separated?'

'Oh! I will write to you, tell you all my thoughts, all my feelings, a regular journal it will be, hour by hour.'

She shook her head. 'You will not write to me,' she said decidedly.

'And why not?'

'For two reasons. The first is—no letter reaches me without having passed first through my father's hands and having been opened by him. I do not choose that he should be initiated into all the effusions of your dear little heart.

The second——' and she hesitated. 'Do you remember I refused one day to listen to the confidences you wished to pour out, though they would have remained for ever buried in my heart? But *written* confidences!—ah, Carina, beware of those! Either you will address them to some person you trust absolutely, and who is unworthy, who may perhaps betray them, and you will heartily regret you ever granted her your trust; or you will keep them yourself, you will forget them, and you will come upon them some day when your heart is changed as well as your ideas, and in reading them over, you may blush at sentiments which once seemed to you most innocent, or you will shed bitter tears over the poor delusions whose wings have been clipped by time and experience.'

I have scrupulously followed Beata's wise advice all my young life, but now when my own daughter has passed the age I was, when she gave it to me, now when I have left my youth far behind me, an irresistible desire urges me to do what I have never yet done, and having no one to whom I can open my heart, I feel a melancholy pleasure in relating the story of my

past, to this imaginary being, this Valrogis who is a stranger to me. Shall I repent it? Shall I be forced to recognise once more the wisdom and prudence of Beata's counsel given so long ago?

'Well,' I replied, 'as you do not wish me to write to you, I shall come and see you from time to time. We shall not be everlastingly in Rome, and from Florence to Serramonte will be a very short journey.'

She shook her head, saying with a sad smile, 'But you will not find me there.'

'Why? You will be married, of course, by then, and probably living in the lower Palazzo. For I do not think Monsieur Mohrenstein will expect you to go on living in your present bat's nest. They put you up there while you are engaged—that is all right, and I quite understand it: but it will be much pleasanter to go and see you lower down, than to climb up to your present nest in the rocks. Of course, Monsieur Mohrenstein will always live at Serramonte, because he has his business and his interests there.'

'You are mistaken,' she replied. 'He will return to Germany as soon as he is married,

and when the laboratory is finished and arranged. He has his own home and his own interests.'

I sprang with a bound to my feet, troubled and indignant. 'And he will carry you away with him!' I cried.

'What is there to astonish you in that? Does not a wife always follow her husband?'

'And you will consent to go and live always in that frightful land of beer-drinkers, where the houses are nothing but barracks, and where their language is like the croaking of frogs, where everybody looks like a sausage, where the women spend their days in knitting socks, and cutting bread and butter! Surely you will not consent to exile yourself, to quit for ever our beautiful country, our beloved Tuscany, our olive-trees, our *contadini*, so polite, so intelligent, so amiable, never to hear the tongue of Tasso, of Ariosto spoken! You will consent to leave me for ever! never to see me again! Ah! I do not understand you, Beata, or rather I do understand, you have no heart! By dint of always mortifying yourself, you have become so holy, so perfect, that you have ceased to love at all. Whether you live here or in

Germany, whether you marry Monsieur Mohrenstein or somebody else, it is quite the same to you, provided you do your duty. You have only one idea, to sacrifice yourself, and to obey. If your father were to order you to fling yourself down from the highest tower of Serramonte, I am certain you would do it joyfully.'

She listened to me with clasped hands. 'Have you quite done, little enthusiast?' she inquired very calmly when she saw that my flow of eloquence was exhausted.

'No, Palma, spite of your opinion of me, I would *never* obey an unjust or unreasonable order. My father requires my obedience, and he has a perfect right to it—that is, he has a right to command—and it is my duty to obey him as long as my conscience does not disapprove. I will freely confess to you that he opposed positively the dearest wish of my heart, viz. to become a nun, and at first this was a terrible grief to me. Now I am grateful to him for his opposition, for I see that it was pure selfishness on my part, which made me long for the peace and contemplation of the cloister. In the convent I should have been shielded from all storms, all battles, all perils. God required

something different from me, He wishes me to work and act in this world, and in my present loneliness I have time to prepare to fulfil worthily the mission which He deigns to intrust to me. Life is so short, Palma! and there is so much to be done, so many unhappy ones to help, ignorant to teach, children to care for and educate, and sick to soothe.

'To forget one's own petty personal sorrows, we need only to look at those of others. But unfortunately we are always tempted to fall back on ourselves, to analyse our feelings, and brood over our own impressions, and this is a danger I must specially warn you against, dear child.

'Make a determined effort to get out of yourself by deeds of active charity; open your heart and widen the circle of your affections and interests. Instead of weeping over the dream that God has seen fit to dispel, over the affection He sees fit to crush, go and dry the tears of some stricken creature whom you can help. And more than all, lift up your heart to God, Palma. We cannot live without loving, we women—our heart has been given us for that, but let us love the highest. Love is a

necessity, and child as you are, you know this, dear, it is our meat and drink, our weakness and our strength, our happiness and our woe. To heal its wounds there is but one remedy, and do you know what it is? A stronger, deeper, more intense love than that which has made us suffer, the love of God. Happy are those who in their first sorrow have sought and found the sympathy of the God-man, who has Himself suffered; but happier still those who have not waited till the hour of despair to come to Him, but have brought to His feet their fresh, pure hearts that He may keep and guard them Himself: this is the happiness I would covet for you, Palma!'

I listened breathless, drinking in her words as if an angel spoke; she had never talked so freely before, and when she ceased, I threw myself into her arms and burst into tears. I saw her no more that year.

CHAPTER V

For reasons which were never clearly explained to me, my father's opera, at which he had worked all the winter, and which he had put on the stage at the *Pergola*, was only represented once. It was a great social event, doubly important, as it was never repeated. My father designed all the scenes, and the dresses of the principal actors, regulated the ballet, conducted the orchestra himself. It brought him a perfect ovation, but it also put the finishing stroke to his fortunes. He made superb presents to the *prima donna* and to the actors, gave banquets to the chorus and the scene-shifters, and spent fabulous sums in flowers, suppers, jewellery—without paying for them!

His man of business having shown him plainly that it was absolutely imperative that he should think seriously of the future, and reduce his expenses decidedly, he came to

spend the following summer at Ventaglia, resolved not to entertain at all. The first news that greeted me on our arrival was that Beata had married. I had heard nothing about it in Florence, the Cecchi had not sent any of the usual 'faire part,' and she was quite unknown in Florentine society, having spent all her life in Rome.

The marriage had been celebrated without the least pomp—almost secretly—and this excited Fortunato's indignation and was the source of inexhaustible eloquence on Generosa's part.

When the building of the new works and the chemical laboratory was completed towards the end of the winter, on a day when the cruel *bise* swept over the country, cutting off the early blooms of the almond-trees, the two Cecchi, accompanied by Monsieur Mohrenstein, went up to Serramonte. Not a guest was invited, there was no reception, no dinner, not a gun was fired. Beata di Cecchi, the only daughter of the great millionaire, the lord of Serramonte, was married without trumpet or drum, in a way which the poorest *contadina* in her father's employ would have blushed to imitate.

A carriage drove her to the station with her husband and the stout German, immediately after the nuptial benediction had been given, and from that hour no one in the neighbourhood had heard anything at all about her.

In the month of October my father learnt that my grandmother de Valrogis was dangerously ill, and as he was anxious to show the last mark of esteem and affection for the mother of the wife whom he had loved so passionately, he started at once for Burgundy where she was living on her estate, promising to summon me later, if my grandmother expressed any wish to see me.

He only arrived in time to receive her last sigh, but was warmly welcomed by all the members of the mourning family. The vintage was at its height there, and he at once took a lively interest in all the operations connected with it, and resolved to introduce on his own property new vats and wine-presses, after the pattern of those used in Burgundy. As this would necessitate a complete revolution in the old methods, he engaged a vinedresser of those parts, brought him to Ventaglia and invested him with full powers to do what he judged best.

He then summoned Fortunato to his study, and tried to explain his plans to him. All vines trained in wreaths and on trellises were to be abolished. *Pergolas* (or vine walks) were all very well as shady walks, or as subjects for artists' sketches, but they only yielded detestable wine which would not keep. In future he meant to have his vines all planted on slopes and not higher than one yard from the soil. He should build a wine-press on the site of the present oil-mill. No more olive-trees for him, it was a senseless kind of culture, and perfectly contemptible in the profits it brought, it was impossible to count on any gain from the crop more than once in every four years.

Fortunato listened respectfully, with his eyes fixed on his felt hat, which he kept twisting round and round between his hands.

'Signor Count,' he said at last, 'I was born at Ventaglia, and for the last forty years I have been bailiff on the estate. I have done all I could, but spite of it all, I see the value of the property growing less and less each year, whilst the mortgages increase and the taxes too. The Count will permit me to observe that hitherto he has not been fortunate in his speculations.

But this last one will be the utter ruin of the family in whose service I have grown old. I know this soil and I know what suits it. These foreign systems are not good for this country. No one will ever buy wine made at Ventaglia, it will be a failure, and, saving your presence, Signor, I would much rather retire and give place to this Frenchman who seems inclined to turn everything topsy-turvy, and I daresay knows a great deal more than I do!'

My father burst into a fit of laughing. 'You are an idiot, Fortunato,' he cried. 'Do you really think I am going to let you go, that I may put this stranger, of whom I know nothing, in your place? No, you are one of the family, my good old fellow.'

Fortunato's eyes filled with tears, and he stooped down and kissed his master's hand with effusion. 'Only,' went on my father, 'I repeat, —you are an idiot. You fill your head with old-fashioned ideas, and you want to hinder me from growing as rich as these Cecchi; but I am not going to allow you to influence me, per Bacco! and I shall carry out my own idea. I should like to know how it comes to pass, that whenever the Cecchi bring out some new inven-

tion, every one approves of it; but if I attempt the least improvement, the whole world blames me, or turns it into ridicule. Have they not dug up their vines to plant mulberry-trees instead? Have they not each year erected new buildings, laundries, dye-works, what not? Have they not constantly adopted some new machine, to spin or weave their silk or mangle their workpeople? Every one bows down to them, and admires all they do. But how is it? The Cecchi grow richer and richer, while I shall soon be reduced to eating nothing but polenta.' He said this with the piteous tone of a child who had just been denied some delicacy.

I burst out laughing. 'Poor papa!' I said, throwing my arms round his neck, 'don't be distressed. I am always ready to understand you, if no one else will. We will at once go to work with the vines and the presses, and I will help you to superintend the work if you like. I undertake to explain everything to Fortunato and make him see how right you are. But don't you worry; it does not at all suit you. Smile, *papa caro!* When we have no money left, then I will give music lessons, as Aunt

Landi proposed. I have got on wonderfully since then! I will charge at least three francs fifty a lesson. We shall be quite rich with that, and I shall be very proud to support my old father. Has he any grey hairs, I wonder? Not one, even if I searched well. His hair is so fine, and silky, and black. Carlo Cecchi's is as coarse as a horse's tail, sticks up like a brush, and is already quite white at the temples.'

'Carlo Cecchi is four years my junior, young lady.'

'I don't care, you look like his son, and he is as ugly and common as you are handsome, and elegant, and *distingué*, and charming. How mother must have loved you,' I said, growing suddenly grave.

A veil of sadness at once clouded his face, he removed my arms from his neck, rose and walked away to the window, where he stood gazing out and wrapped in thought.

Poor Aunt Landi! A very few days after this conversation, she passed away without any pain, in her *salon*, surrounded by all her intimate friends.

Grande dame to the last, she insisted on putting on her best dress, adorned herself with

all her diamonds, and invited all her friends to be present at the Mass, which by special permission was performed in her immense *salon*, transformed into a chapel for the occasion. Seated or rather reclining on a sofa, she received the last sacraments, and said farewell to each of those present, holding my father's hand as he knelt by her side. When the ceremony was over, her last look was for me; then her head, which was carefully dressed and covered by a lace veil fastened with diamonds, dropped on her breast, and she passed away without a spasm or a sigh. As my father was her sole heir, his creditors had counted on this death as their one chance of getting paid. 'It seems my poor aunt knew me better than I knew myself, Palma,' he said with an expression of comic humility when he returned from hearing her will read at the notary's. 'She has not left one sou of her fortune to me.'

'To whom, then?'

'To you, Carina, and you are now one of the richest marriageable heiresses in Tuscany.'

'Bah! then it is just the same as if she had left it to you, father darling! Could anything be mine and not yours just as much?'

'On the contrary, I have not even the right to look at your money. You have no power to touch the capital till after you are married, and till then you are not even to enjoy the income! It is better so. My poor aunt was right.'

'But no!' I cried quickly, 'she was wrong, a thousand times wrong! How! I haven't even the right to use a sufficient sum to help you in planting your vines French fashion? What good will this fortune do to me?'

'It will help you to make a good marriage, Carina.'

'I daresay! it will help me to find some man who will marry me for my money! Many thanks! I would rather not have a sou! From this moment I shall have to distrust every one, and the instant any person attempts to pay me court, I shall detest him!'

He looked at me tenderly. 'Your mother was rich, Palma,' he said very softly. 'Do you think I married her for her fortune?'

I threw myself into his arms. 'When you have found me a husband like yourself in everything, father darling, I will take him without hesitating. But he must be exactly like you, or I won't have him.'

'We shall see,' he replied.

Without saying anything to him, I sought an interview with the notary to be certain that it was really impossible for me to dispose of any part of the fortune that belonged to me. The will was clear and not to be questioned. An insignificant sum was at my disposal and was paid over to me at once; and this I brought in triumph to my father, to be used by him in starting his new project. He had inspired me with his own impatience, and I longed for a fairy's wand which would cause the wine-press to spring out of the earth ready for use, instead of its rising slowly brick by brick, as it now did.

My father doubled the number of workmen and stimulated their industry by liberal supplies of wine and supplementary meals. When pay-day came round, however, Fortunato's expression was one of utter despair; this made my father laugh;—he amused himself in mimicking him, and in sketching his profile.

'A little patience, Fortunato,' he exclaimed. 'You will see we shall be rolling in money, two or three years hence. Meanwhile we must be prudent and save as much as we can.'

'Palma, do you think we could do this summer with only two horses in the stable? I assure you I would give up the two others willingly, if you think you could manage with only two.'

Accordingly two horses which had cost ten thousand francs in Florence were sold for five thousand at Pescia, and this was the only retrenchment we made in our expenses.

My father superintended his workmen from morning till night. To indemnify himself for the lost time arising from Sundays and fête days (the latter very frequent in Italy), he had served out to his men, under those *pergolas* that were not as yet swept away, ample dinners, after which they danced with the *contadine.*

My father was delighted to see them enjoying themselves, and he invited all his farmers and labourers to join the circle of dancers.

At last on a certain day of October, the first wine was drawn from the wine-press; my father could not contain himself for joy, and declared it was superior to all he had ever tasted before.

His first thought was to invite all his friends in the neighbourhood and round Florence to come and taste it too. He drew up a long list

of invitations which he entrusted to me to send out, and he gave the cook *carte blanche*, to order everything that was most exquisite and *recherché*.

On this list of invitations I was amazed to find the name of the Cecchi. 'The Cecchi too!' I said with scorn. 'What pleasure can you have in inviting such wretched misers as those two?'

He rubbed his hands chuckling. 'There is no one I am more anxious to see than these two. We will prove to them that they are not the only people who can do business, and succeed in their enterprises. We will make them taste such wine as they never drank before in their lives, and we will make them tipsy, Carina. I should like to see old Cecchi in the same plight as father Noah. And you, Mademoiselle Fournier? I warrant he will forget himself as far as to presume to pay court to you. But you will be quite able to set him down.'

At this speech I grew as crimson as a peony, feeling myself guilty in having confided to my father certain private opinions which I had much better have kept to myself.

The memorable day arrived at last, a warm autumn day, when the bright sun brought out glorious purple and amber tints from the fading leaves.

From early dawn, country carts and waggons drawn by oxen arrived from the station and the neighbourhood, pouring into the lower regions of the Palazzo, loads of game from Bohemia, salmon from the Rhine, garlic-flavoured truffles from Bologna, pâtés from Strasbourg, potted meats from Nerac; in fact, costly and rare delicacies from all parts.

Whenever my father invited his friends to his house, he considered that nothing was good enough or choice enough for them. He, who personally was the easiest man in the world to satisfy, became particular and exacting for his guests. He remembered the tastes and preferences of each one after the lapse of years, and even to those who were indifferent to him, he showed a kind of almost womanly attention and care. The idea of any one needing anything under his roof was unbearable to him, and he never gave himself a moment's rest till he had found means to supply the deficiency. His one wish was to see every one around him

happy, and to accomplish this nothing was too difficult or costly.

He had busied himself in the preparations of this fête even to the smallest details, but when the day came, he completely dropped the master of the house. His one desire was that each guest on arriving should feel, 'Here I am at home.' His courtesy to all was perfect, but so imbued with kindness and so free from all stiffness, that by a word or a gesture he knew how to set those beneath him at ease at once, while at the same time his manner and his air of a high-born gentleman forbade even a thought of any misplaced familiarity. The table had been laid in the *loggia*, which was beautifully decorated with tapestry and flowers. Wreaths of Spanish jasmine and mimosa, linked together from column to column, shields displaying the arms of the principal guests, admirably worked out in cut flowers of the proper heraldic colours. The marble pavement was strewn with a thick carpet of rose leaves and myrtle blossoms.

In great red copper vases dating from the fifteenth century, stood bottles of wine cooling in ice, while on the table, the famous wine

grown at Ventaglia sparkled in light flasks covered with cases of rice straw and ornamented with tufts of coloured silk.

On the extensive lawn in front of the *loggia* were displayed barrels of wine and gigantic cakes of chestnut meal, these being the refreshments prepared for the peasants, who were to mingle their rejoicings with those of their lord, and to dance on the turf, while we did the same in the great *salon*. The park was thrown open to all, for every one was invited to do honour to the new wine, and bands of music played the whole day. At noonday a special train brought our guests from Florence. This was the first entertainment of any kind that my father had given since my Aunt Landi's death, and I was, at first, rather astonished at finding myself quite differently treated from what I had always hitherto been. Having grown up amongst all these people who were my father's friends, I had hitherto been treated by them as a little girl.

Now that I was seventeen, had I really suddenly become a personage of importance? I found myself the centre of a circle who bowed low before me, and treated me with ceremony,

and these were the same friends who had held me on their knees when I was a baby, called me by my pet name, and had always till to-day addressed me as 'thou.'

I was so innocent and careless, that it never entered into my head to think that in the eyes of some, there would be a vast difference in the position of the dowerless daughter of the amiable Count Balducci, who was up to his neck in debt, and that of the wealthy heiress of the Princess Landi. I was too thoroughly my father's daughter to entertain such a thought.

In all the eager attention paid me, I only saw the result of general kindliness, and my heart expanded in the influence of this atmosphere of feasting and gaiety which I drank in with the heavily scented air from countless flowers. I was happy in living, in being young and pretty, as some said—and I enjoyed myself without any *arrière pensée.*

Nevertheless a miserable, hateful feeling was creeping like a serpent into my Paradise. Amongst all the young, graceful, and remarkably pretty women, whose rippling laughter mingled with the distant strains of the band, there was one who eclipsed all the rest, and

whom I cordially detested on account of her beauty, the faultless elegance of her dress, and her grace and subtle charm, which she put forth with the evident intention of bewitching my father.

The Princess Dell' Orso wore on this occasion a robe of amber-coloured satin covered with black lace, which set off to perfection the ivory whiteness of her Neapolitan complexion and the bright coral of her sensual lips.

A knot of scarlet carnations rested on her jet black hair, and her eyes shone like black diamonds from under the deep shadows cast by sweeping eyelashes like those of a child.

I was madly jealous of her. Her triumphant expression, the place she had occupied on my father's right hand during dinner, her frequent half-whispered conversations with him, had filled my heart with violent and evil feelings towards her.

The new wine had been tasted, appreciated, warmly approved, and praised, and yet — I fancied that the silk tufted *fiaschi* (straw-covered flasks) were emptied much less rapidly than the venerable bottles of Chateau La Rose,

and Chateau Yquem covered with cobwebs and the dust of years.

The guests had risen from table just as the flaming sun sank behind the hills, and groups of strollers wandered into the park and disappeared under the groves of cypresses and evergreen oaks. It was delightful to inhale the cool, fresh evening breeze after the moist, enervating heat of this autumn day.

The lustres in the *salon* where the guests were to dance were being lit; for the moment the band was silent, the musicians being busy fortifying themselves just then with an ample dinner, washed down by copious libations. I wandered down from the *loggia* alone and in an extremely bad temper. In the distance I had noticed the Cecchi's carriage coming up the avenue towards the Palazzo, and as I was not at all disposed to waste my politeness in receiving them, I preferred leaving my father to fulfil this duty. Besides, I counted on their arrival to disturb a *tête-à-tête*, which filled my heart with rage.

Hidden by the thick laurel hedge behind, which was the marble bench on which I had so often sat with Beata, I had been watching for

some time through a gap in the branches made by my fingers, a couple passing and repassing in the pale twilight, who to my eyes were the perfection of beauty and distinguished appearance.

Spite of the rage in my heart, I could not help confessing to myself that Isabella Dell' Orso was, that day at least, positively dazzling in her radiant and triumphant beauty. She was walking slowly, her lips parted in a smile which displayed two rows of pearly teeth, playing coquettishly with her fan and bending her head to one side, while my father bowed his handsome brown head over her, and seemed to be perfectly fascinated by her. I ground my teeth and clenched my hands, while I stripped off every flower within my reach, all unconscious of the approach of another party of strollers on the other side of the hedge.

The red sparks of their cigars glowed in the fast-gathering darkness, and their voices reached the hiding-place where I had concealed myself and my temper. Broken fragments of sentences were wafted to my ears.

'One must allow that Isabella is royally beautiful to-day!'

'Why does he not marry her, now that she is a widow——'

'Bah! what is the use! It has been going on for such a long time. Once he were married, he would not know where to spend his evenings.'

Here the conversation was interrupted by vigorous puffs of smoke.

'This Silvio! what a fool, still how charming in his madness! Impossible for any man to do the honours of his house more gracefully than he does! He ruins himself like a grand seigneur, with incomparable grace.'

'Every one delights in his follies, and his very creditors dote on him.'

'If he decides on marrying Isabella at once he will do well. She is rich, and will retrieve his shattered fortunes.'

'It is quite the wisest thing he can do.'

'An excellent speculation in all respects.'

'Better a great deal than his new wine-press and all his other inventions.'

'Abominable sour stuff this famous wine of his; atrocious!'

I recognised the voice of one who, only a few

minutes ago, had declared the wine of Ventaglia to be superior to the finest quality of Chianti.

Violet shadows spread over the horizon; a confused sound of musicians tuning their instruments buzzed in the air, like the murmur of a hive which is invaded by a hornet. I knew it was the time for the dancing to begin, and that I should have to quit my hiding-place and face Isabella Dell' Orso without making a grimace at her, and I just wondered how I could possibly resist the strong temptation to do so. I hated her! I must be strong enough to keep from telling her so, though, and alas, I was never accustomed to conceal my feelings.

A hand was laid on my shoulder, so lightly, that at first I fancied it was only a touch from a laurel branch, then a voice breathed my name close to my ear. My heart beat quickly; who could this be—was it a vision, an hallucination, the effect of the deepening darkness?

'Beata!' I cried. Yes, it was really she; sweeter, more loving, more motherly than ever. Could her long absence have been only a dream? I found her now exactly as she was when we parted in this same laurel bower, on this same seat, three years ago. I felt her

pure breath on my forehead and cheeks; her slender, delicate hands clasped mine; she wore exactly the same style of hair and costume, only her face had grown thinner, her figure slightly bent. Her whole appearance, ethe-realised so to speak, formed a striking contrast to the coquettish sensual beauty of Isabella Dell' Orso.

'Beata! Beata!' I said, hiding my flaming cheeks in her breast, 'if you only knew how terribly I needed you at this very moment. How opportunely you came to me! If you only knew what hateful, evil, execrable thoughts had seized hold of me. Now you are here, it seems as if they had all vanished. I have forgotten it all, the joy of seeing you again has wiped everything out. But how do you come to be here? When did you arrive at Serramonte?'

'Only to-day, *chérie*, and as the first thing I heard of was your father's invitation to mine, I took the liberty of inviting myself as well. I wanted to surprise you, and I do not know exactly why, but I felt certain I should find you on this seat—my instinct, or rather my heart guided me aright, you see. But, darling,

how you have grown! I must not detain you longer here. Your father will be wondering at your absence; and see, dancing has already begun in the *salon*, and the *contadini* are ready to begin too on the lawn. I shall vanish now, so happy to have seen you again, but I will come back to-morrow here, as in the old days. I have something to say to you.'

'But why must you go now?'

'I only came to see you and give you a kiss. Do you remember I have not been invited?'

'Nonsense! Have you no better reason than that to give me?'

'Well, I promised my father and Carlo only to stay one minute.'

'Still a victim to filial obedience?' I said, laughing. 'No, Beata, I won't detain you this evening, as you have promised to come back to-morrow; but grant me one favour. Come and let me introduce you to my father, who has never met you. You will help me to avoid committing a crime. You must squeeze my hands tight, lest I should yield to the temptation of tearing out a pair of eyes.'

'Jealous? Poor Palma!'

'I will tell you all about it to-morrow, as in old times,' I whispered, as I drew her towards the *salon*, which was blazing with light. I did not even notice the singular effect her long black robe and sable veil produced, amid all the fresh, gay toilettes that fluttered around us. I saw my father still escorting his beautiful guest, and I crossed the *salon* to join him.

'Papa! this is Beata, my best friend, you know,' I said brusquely.

My father bowed low over her extended hand, and looked at her attentively as he thanked her for the kindness she had always shown me in the past; asked where her father and brother were, as he regretted to say he had not yet welcomed them; and as she pointed out to him the isolated corners where they were sitting, he offered her his arm to conduct her to them.

I remained alone with the Princess Dell' Orso. 'Who is that nun?' she asked, with a gesture of great annoyance.

'Madame Mohrenstein, Beata de Cecchi.'

'Ah! the girl who married a Jew. She would be handsome if she dressed better.'

'She has no need to resort to any artifices

to be the most beautiful woman wherever she is,' I said bitterly.

She tapped me on the cheek with the end of her fan. 'You are in a bad temper, little one,' she said. 'What is the matter? You are jealous of the beautiful nun. You are right, beware of her. It is just women like her, with their natural and unadorned beauty, who inspire great passion. We poor women of the world, when we are admired, it is always with some kind of reservation; men always calculate what is our real value, they involuntarily try to discover how far our beauty is indebted to the art of our hairdresser, our dressmaker, jeweller, corset-maker and perfumer. They love us a great deal in fancy, from caprice or idleness, but with the heart! Yes; sometimes, but very rarely. Those women, with smooth hair and simple dress, it is quite different with them, and beware of them I tell you.'

'Yes, I distrust some women,' I said impertinently, 'but not Beata.'

'Who, then? me? You are very wrong, Carina,' and she gave a deep sigh which greatly surprised me, as it seemed sincere. The orchestra struck up a waltz, and my

partner led me off to join the dancers. At midnight the first fireworks attracted every one to the *loggia*, and after these, supper was to follow. It was to this supper the Cecchi had been invited, but as Beata had told me they did not intend to wait for it, I did not even look for her among the crowd of guests.

All at once I saw my father was talking to some one as tall, slender, and erect as himself. The *loggia* seemed dark after the brilliantly lighted *salon*, and it was difficult to distinguish features.

At that moment a rocket went off with a loud whizz. The golden arrow darted through space, and then burst into a shower of brilliant stars, making the night as bright as day for the moment. Suddenly my heart stopped beating, by the weird light I had recognised the features of my father's companion! That look, winning and grave, that handsome brown head, manly and serious, belonged to the hero who had haunted all my youthful dreams. My father seeing me, came up to me quickly. 'Palma,' he said, 'you have not yet met the brother of my excellent friend, the Duc Biglio, at whose

villa on the Lake of Como, I spent such a delicious time last year. What hearty hospitality in that splendid house! I was so happy I could have stayed there for ever. Now that I have got you at Ventaglia, my dear Mario, I am going to compel you to do as I did. I don't mean to let you go! How long does your leave last? only a month! come, that is not much! I don't mean to let you slip, so much the worse for you. Unfortunately I have nothing to offer you that can compare with the pleasures I had on your lake, regattas and moonlight expeditions in gondolas, etc. etc. But if we try hard, we may find on the mountains here a few partridges, thrushes, or at any rate, blackbirds, and perhaps a flight of woodcock. Several of my kind guests have promised to stay on. Where did you alight? at Pistoia? at the hotel? What an idea! I am going to order them to send your luggage here. Ventaglia itself is as full as an egg. But there is always room in the strangers' quarters. Excuse me!'

He beckoned to a servant who was handing refreshments, and went off with him to give the necessary orders, leaving me alone with Mario.

'My visit to you this evening, Signorina Palma, must strike you as most extraordinary, almost as much so as the one I paid you three years ago. I invited myself to this fête, what can you think of such a proceeding?'

'Only that by so doing you make two people happy, my father and myself.'

'You are very kind.'

'Truly this evening has been one of pleasant surprises! I have just had the pleasure of welcoming here a very dear friend I fancied far away in Germany. You know her, for you met her here three years ago—Madame Mohrenstein, Beata Cecchi. I think I remember your saying you had known her before, though?'

'Exactly! I had seen her often at her grandmother's house in Rome.'

'Tell me about her,' I said eagerly. 'Though we are very intimate, I have never ventured to question Beata about her life before she came to Serramonte. Her grandmother's death was so recent then, that I dreaded to remind her of her grief. Besides, she always showed such a dislike to speaking about herself. I have always longed to know

if she had always been as calm, and saintly, and angelic as she is now. Of course I could never suspect her of having been full of tricks and giddy like a young person you met some time ago, and who, by the way, must have given you the impression of an extremely badly-brought-up young lady. But still it seems to me impossible that Beata could have always been as she is now. She always strikes me as having ripened too early, owing to some great sorrow. Her exaggerated obedience to her father seems that of a person who had suffered so much that she has at last come to care for nothing, and who gives up everything just for peace' sake. Yet I have never heard her complain, and she always declares she is not unhappy. I believe she is a saint myself, but I should like to know if she has always been. As you knew her before I did, do tell me what you think.'

As I spoke, a loud detonation attracted my eyes to the light scaffolding on which were fixed the fireworks for the concluding bouquet, and as the last star went out, I turned to Mario, my eyes so dazzled by the Bengal lights I could scarcely make out his features.

'I knew Beata Cecchi when she was just

at the age you were, when I had the honour of meeting you for the first time,' he said very slowly. 'Her grandmother, who had been my mother's intimate friend, was one of the most distinguished lovable women I have ever known. Superior in every respect, she held one of the most delightful *salons* in Rome. Besides a large circle of choice intimate friends, every stranger who had the slightest claim to being interesting in any way, was always to be met there. Beata Cecchi grew up in the midst of this circle of noble spirits, and she was the delight of all. Every one admired her, every one adored her.' He stopped——

'Poor Beata!' I said, almost involuntarily. 'What a contrast to Serramonte. I doubt her being happy in her new country. I only saw her for a minute to-night, but to me she looked more fragile, more transparent than ever. I think she must have been ill, she looks so pale. Her magnificent eyes look bigger and deeper than ever, and her smile has never been so sweet. I think her as beautiful as an angel, but you will see her to-morrow, she promised me she would come.'

The band ceased playing only when the

crimson rays of the rising sun streaked the horizon and chased away the mists of dawn, and then I found myself alone with my father for the first time.

Leaning on his arm I went up the staircase which led to my room, rather tired by the dancing. When we had reached the last step I seized his hand and covered it with kisses. 'Papa! papa! my dear, my darling father,' I cried.

'What is the matter, Carina?'

'Is it true that you love your little Palma really, really enough to—Papa mio, I love you so much, so much!—with all my heart:—you don't know what you are to me. You would not put any one between you and your little daughter, would you? Tell me that you love me a great deal, more than all the world, than all other women, even than——'

He looked at me in surprise. 'Yes, Carina,' he replied, as he gently passed his hand over my hair; 'this little head is dearer to me than the whole world—and I do not like to see it filled with foolish ideas and tormenting itself with groundless jealousies. Have I understood you rightly? Am I not a clever father

No, *chérie*; no one else understands me thoroughly, no one can take that first place in my heart which belongs to you by right.'

I laid my head on his shoulder. 'And, father,' I asked, 'why have you never told me that you knew Mario Arsina?'

'What! I never told you! you are dreaming! I have spoken a hundred times of Del Biglio and his beautiful villa. I daresay I forgot to mention Mario, because socially he does not count, as he is a younger son. His brother has the title and the family fortune, and as his charming wife has presented him with four fine sturdy boys, Mario has not the slightest chance of ever becoming Duke del Biglio. Besides, I fancy he is rather like your father, he contracted heavy debts which his brother has most generously paid. Only at present he is obliged to live on his officer's pay—which means starvation! He is a charming fellow though, and I am very fond of him. Good-night, Carina, or rather good-morning.'

As for me, I was not the least sleepy, for I had so many other questions I wanted to ask him about Mario Arsina!

CHAPTER VI

'COME here to our favourite seat, it will be like old times,' I said next day, drawing Beata to the laurel grove, while my father went to the new wine-press with Monsieur Mohrenstein and Carlo who had escorted her, and who took the most lively interest in my father's new wine-making inventions. I scrutinised Beata closely, and my impressions of the previous evening were confirmed; she had evidently suffered much, but her beauty was greater than ever.

It was impossible to picture a purer and more perfect Madonna type than hers was, but it was of the Madonna after Calvary. 'Are you really happy?' I asked with some hesitation. She looked at me quietly. 'I have had one of the geatest earthly joys,' she replied. 'God sent me a little fair angel, and I had just time to discover a glimpse of heaven in his blue eyes, when he fled away as I pressed him to my

heart. He will be always happy now. I shall never see him weep nor suffer, nor bruise his pretty little rosy feet on this world's stony path. When I see him again, he will have nothing to tell me of, save perfect bliss. I love to picture his happiness.'

'But what of yourself, Beata?'

Her eyes filled with tears, though her lips strove to smile.

'My darling! I do not even dare to envy him his happiness. I seek to console myself for the loss of his kisses by gathering round me as much as possible, tiny children, fair as he was. Monsieur Mohrenstein is kind enough, and generous enough, never to grudge any money I spend in carrying out this whim.'

'That must be because he adores you!'

'He loves me far more than I deserve, and is very indulgent. But let us talk now about you. Do you remember that I warned you yesterday that I had something special to say to you?'

I nodded.

'Forgive me for meddling in what does not actually concern me—but I believe it to be my duty to give you a piece of advice which may help you to avoid a great danger.'

'What is it?'

'That of allowing yourself to be led away by your kind heart into the commission of a generous, unselfish act which you will bitterly regret for the rest of your life.'

'But I do not understand.'

'No, I am not surprised that you do not. I will explain more clearly. You were never clever at arithmetic, and I do not fancy you have made any great progress lately. You will need it though in after life, as you are destined to be the mistress of a large fortune. You know business is the one topic talked of at Serramonte—one of the first things I learnt on my arrival there, was the desperate condition of your father's affairs, while at the same time I heard you were the heiress of the Princess Landi—that you had become rich—very rich.'

'Rich!' I said scornfully. 'I have not the power to give a few thousand francs to pay my father's debts!'

'Unfortunately it would take many hundred thousand francs to do that,' she replied gravely. 'They increase daily, and your father will have to take some decided steps at once, if he would avoid a public scandal.'

'Papa is never distressed,' I replied carelessly, 'he always knows how to get out of his difficulties.'

'Yes, as long as his creditors are men whom he has fascinated so far with his kindly grace, his exquisite politeness and the power he has of inspiring sympathy and affection in every one, even those he wrongs most by not paying. But suppose a day should come when he will have to deal with a man who is hard, inflexible, exacting, inaccessible to any feelings of pity, incapable of dealing justly; how will it be then?' I knew not how to answer this question.

'Suppose this creditor should demand instant payment; which would mean the forced sale of Marciana, Ventaglia, and the palazzo at Florence?'

I was now very grave.

'To him,' she continued, 'this would mean ruin, the loss of social position, beggary in fact.'

'He would always have my fortune,' I said.

'Yes, your fortune, of which you cannot touch one penny till you marry.'

'Then I would marry,' I replied as I cast down my eyes.

'Whom would you marry? Do you think it would be easy to find any man sufficiently disinterested to take you with the list of your father's debts—besides, to marry you almost without any fortune, as your aunt's money would, I fear, be almost entirely swallowed up by these debts?'

I was dumb.

With a tremulous voice she went on: 'If for some reason or another such a man should come forward, would you agree to marry him without love, without devotion, simply to save your father from ruin?'

'I do not know,' I answered, much moved.

She took my two hands in hers and held them tight. 'Listen, Palma,' she said, 'you trust me, don't you?'

'Absolutely—blindly.'

'Well, then, you must give me a solemn promise. If your father receives a proposal for your hand in marriage shortly, very soon in fact, you will give no answer until you have spoken to me first: you will undertake nothing without consulting me. I ask this, I insist on it. As for your father, I know him well enough to be certain he would never dispose of your

future life without your full consent. I have your word of honour, have I not?' she repeated, still holding my hands in hers.

'I am only too delighted to be guided by you, Beata,' I answered. 'I hope you are going to stay a long time at Serramonte.'

'I know nothing yet. I hope so too. Monsieur Mohrenstein is anxious to try the experiment of some chemical processes he has just discovered, and which my father thinks a great deal of. It is still a secret, but if it succeeds they will make immense profits from it.

'Oh! water always flows to the river,' I said, laughing.

'The Cecchi grow tremendously rich, while the Balducci, bah! What does it matter? At Ventaglia every one is happy and bright, specially I, now you have come back. Do you know, Beata, I had another surprise last night, another guest we did not expect—just guess! you know him very well, and we were talking about you. But stay, there he is himself, coming down the steps of the *loggia*. I fancy he is coming to see us, just as he did three years ago. Have you not guessed who it is?'

'Mario Arsina!'

She murmured something I could not hear. My father, Monsieur Mohrenstein, and Carlo joined us, but an inexplicable feeling of constraint fell on our party and made me long for the visit to end, and I was relieved when Beata rose and said good-bye.

'I shall come and see you as soon as possible,' I said. 'I suppose you are staying at the lower palazzo; it is less inaccessible than your eagle's nest, but still it is a long way off. This house is so full of guests just at present, that I shall not perhaps be able to have the carriage, but you will come and see me again without waiting for my visit.'

'I don't think so,' she replied almost breathlessly, 'I don't feel very well,' and she pressed her hand to her side.

'Does not Beata give you the same impression as she does me?' I inquired of Mario, when the Serramonte carriage had driven off. 'She looks like a woman who is "going off," as our peasants say.'

'I should think so, indeed,' exclaimed my father, 'and with good reason in such a home. What a set of death's heads! How could that

lovely woman with her splendid starlike eyes make up her mind to marry that walking glacier? He is a husband only for summer use; what an iceberg! By his side a glass of water would turn to solid ice in five minutes. I always distrust those china blue eyes, they strike me as capable of being icily cruel. I suppose it was to get away from Serramonte at any price, that Madame Mohrenstein decided to marry this son of Israel, but I fancy she reckoned without her host, for her husband seems inclined to settle himself down here for good. They came and examined everything in Ventaglia just as if they had made up their minds to possess it, and positively seemed to be taking an inventory of everything. Just fancy, Carina, what the meals must be like in that house! Poor young wife! Corpo di Bacco! I heartily hope some one will come and pay court to her, just to amuse her a little.'

'Papa!' cried I, scandalised. 'Pay court to Beata! If you only knew her! If you understood! She is a saint!'

'I know she has not a thought of flirting—I see that plainly; but she is far more dangerous—she has intense sympathy, and she has that

subtle charm, that strange mysterious power that makes her attractive, bewitching, caressing, charming. When a woman of her type takes possession of a man's heart, do what he will, her memory remains there for ever.'

Strange coincidence! In speaking thus of Beata he repeated almost word for word what had been said to me by Isabella Dell' Orso.

One morning, after a sleepless, restless night, I rose and threw my window wide open. October was gradually taking from us the last lingering summer heat; the moist lawns were covered with fine gauzy spiders' webs, gemmed with dew-drops. Filmy threads called 'Fils de la Vierge' floated through the air, and the dull hum of moths and drones, stupefied with age, struck the ear. All insects grow old at this time of year. The horizon was veiled with pearly vapours through which the orange rays of the rising sun could scarcely pierce. A heavy moisture seemed to draw out the honeyed scents of the Spanish jessamine and gardenias. My head was aching from a sleepless night, and as I stood at my window, the strongly scented air, that rose from the flowers

beneath, seemed to weaken rather than refresh me.

Throwing around me a morning wrapper and tying up my hair with the first ribbon I could find, without waking Generosa who was still sleeping, I crept softly down to the park. At the bottom of a sloping lawn rippled the stream which ran into the Pescia, after having supplied the great marble basin, the fountains, and the tiny jets of water which spouted out at the entrance to the grottoes, under the feet of any imprudent visitor who unwittingly stepped on the hidden spring which set them flowing. I loved this thicket of wild vegetation, under whose shade the brook flowed amid the ferns and hart's-tongue. Little water-wagtails perched on the pebbles with their tails in the air, giving them a wide-awake look, while the dragon flies wheeled round and round, displaying their brilliant corslets of turquoise and emerald. The rays of the sun filtered through the evergreen oaks and shrubs, and in the fresh cool shade, the path by the stream was carpeted with beautiful velvety moss. In spring this moss was a mass of violets, yellow primroses, and lilac anemones.

Slowly, dreamily, I bent my steps in this direction, sweeping the damp grass with my trailing robe, without a thought of any possible cold in the future. The silence of this morning of the closing season was unbroken, save by the tinkle of bells from the neighbouring villages ringing for mass, and by the crowing cocks in the farm-yards; the birds were all silent, save here and there a tiny wren uttered its shrill chirp.

I was sad without knowing exactly why I was so. Mario had now been at Ventaglia for a fortnight; we had led the same life under the same roof, met at the same table for meals, saw each other every hour of the day, and yet I was no nearer to him than the day he first came. He did not avoid me, he seemed even to enjoy talking to me, but I scarcely dared to confess this to myself. I would have given the wide world to find out what he thought of me. Always polite and courteous, he had never drawn any nearer to me; he looked at me kindly, because it was his nature to be kind and winning, but with the best will in the world, I could never read in his glance anything but the most ordinary good feeling—I sought for more and was wretched.

Yes, for the first time in my young life I was miserable, for I loved Mario:—I confessed this to myself without any reserve; but I could not delude myself into the belief that the feeling was returned. It was this that had kept me awake all night, which made me wander about like a soul in pain under the leafless trees of the park, gathering with nervous grasp the poor Bengal roses, which I pulled to pieces and threw into the brook. I could not fix my thoughts on anything; the hours seemed to drag wearily on like the chains of a galley-slave; the house stifled me, and yet I shivered in the open air.

Oh that I had some one in whom I could confide, some one whose advice I could ask! Beata? I had not seen her again, for she had been quite ill. And then what could I have said to her? 'I love Mario, and I do not think he loves me.' What could she do? She would probably only have pointed to heaven, preached resignation, patience, submission, and the yielding of my will to God, for she was so pious and saintly. That was all very well; but I—I was never resigned nor patient like her. I longed to be loved, I thirsted

after happiness. I would have given my life to know I was ardently loved. Suddenly I fell on my knees, and raising my clasped hands, cried, 'My God! my God! hear me and grant me my petition. Thou knowest I pray but seldom, alas! but now I do with my whole soul. Even if I am not as happy with him as with another, even if I must suffer greatly, grant me at least the right to love Mario Arsina, and to be able to tell him I do!'

My voice was choked with sobs; I threw myself on the damp moss, repeating wildly, 'I love him so, O my God, I love him so truly! Thou knowest, Thou knowest I have loved no one else, that I have never ceased to love him, that I shall love him only, always, and for ever!'

As I grew calmer, I perceived that the sun was already far above the horizon, and that the confused sound of voices of labourers at their work was rising up from the valleys beneath. I washed my hands and face in the cool waters of the little stream, tied my hair carefully again, after removing the dead leaves and bits of moss from my flowing curls, smoothed my dam[illegible] and slowly retraced my steps to the hou[illegible]nation was no longer sad; the intensity of my

gave me a strange feeling of confidence and trust, for I had never prayed so earnestly before, and I felt certain I should be heard.

Passing before my father's study window, which looked out on the terrace, I saw it was open, so creeping up through the orange-trees, I put in my dishevelled head, crying, 'Good morning, father.'

'Stay! is that you out at this hour?' he said. 'Upon my word, this is a day of early visits! Come here, come instantly, I have something to tell you which will interest you intensely,' and he tossed aside the cigarette he was smoking. 'Guess who has just left this room! I will give you a hundred, a thousand, nay, a hundred thousand guesses. But it is no use, you will never guess. What o'clock is it? Half-past nine in the morning, and I have already received a proposal of marriage!'

I felt the blood rushing to my temples and surging in my ears. 'Come! come!' he cried, touching my cheeks with the tip of his finger, 'what is this? You are blushing, Mademoiselle! Can you by chance——? No, it is all visible.'

patier seized his two hands and kissed them

passionately to hide my confusion. 'I have just come from the garden and it is quite cold,' I stammered.

'Nonsense! nonsense! we neither of us understand telling fibs, *bimba mia*. You are blushing because you have seen a fine gentleman just go out, a man with white gloves who has just spent a full hour with me! He had a maroon-coloured necktie with pink spots! Poor fellow! white gloves at eight o'clock in the morning are a little too much, but for the rest, he was not so bad. He was evidently very eager to look his best. I am certain that with a little guidance and a good tailor we should turn him out most satisfactorily.'

'I never saw any one go out,' I said, completely puzzled.

'No? I thought—well then I have the honour to inform you I have just received a proposal of marriage.'

'For whom?' I asked awkwardly.

'Heavens! not for me! nor yet for Mademoiselle Fournier. Tell me, are you disposed to become the Countess Cecchi?'

'Never!' I cried, with such determination that my father burst into a fit of laughing.

'What a grand outburst!' he said. 'It seems this gentleman is not then indifferent to you. Nevertheless he has a fine energetic head, like the Antonello de Messina in the Louvre—barring the scar——'

'He will soon have one from my hand if he dares——'

'Brava! but you are very ungrateful. His cravat was bewitching, though—his coat was not so bad—it was only the gloves. Those appalling white gloves! You did not see them however, otherwise I should better understand your energetic "Never" just now. This poor young man will ruin himself in clothes. You really ought not to be insensible to the heavy expenses he has incurred, it shows he must be desperately in love.'

'Oh, don't laugh, father darling,' I replied with deep feeling, 'it is very serious.'

He changed his tone at once. 'You are right, Palma,' he said gravely. 'It is even more serious than you think. If you knew the whole truth.'

'What is it? I must know.'

'Well,' he said softly, 'the truth is, I am a ruined man. Until now I have had to deal

with creditors, who were kindly, polite, excellent fellows. I pitied them with all my heart even when I was driven to wrong them. I was ready to make every possible sacrifice to reward them for their patience, to indemnify them for their trouble. And now the case is completely altered.'

'How, father? I don't understand.'

'No! I know you are not learned in business matters. Even when this gentleman explained everything a few minutes ago, I had to make him repeat his information twice over. It appears there is a certain individual (I never even remembered to ask his name) who has bought up all my debts and notes of hand, so that at present he is my sole creditor. He is determined to be paid at once, and when he pleases to drive me from my house, I shall have no option but to depart, leaving the key in the door of Ventaglia. Your servant, sir—he will become the master here, unless——'

'Unless what?'

'I am almost ashamed to tell you. Unless you consent to marry Carlo Cecchi, in which case he offers generously to pay this grasping creditor, to free Ventaglia from all the mortgages

with which I have imprudently burdened it, and then he would be kind enough to authorise me to remain here, warning me I should have to give up the reins entirely into his hands, to annihilate myself socially, and efface myself, being nothing but an extravagant spendthrift.'

'I prize one hair of this dear spendthrift's head a thousand times more than all *his* money-bags.'

He laid a finger on my lips. 'Hush! hear me to the end. My first idea, and probably the best, was to take this man by the shoulders and put him out-of-doors. Do you know what stopped me? The humiliating conviction of my absolute inability to find a plot as ingenious as theirs! The Cecchi are too clever for me! I felt deeply humbled by the intensity of eagerness with which this man Carlo explained his business to me. I am utterly incapable of doing the same. He is a solid, serious, steady man, with whom a wife might be quite safe, perfectly certain he would neither ruin nor deceive her, while as for me!—— He is not at all tender, it is true, but marriage might perhaps soften him: his dress this morning testifies to his desire of appearing more civilised.

With a little good advice and guidance this might be accomplished in time. For instance, I did not hide from him the little inclination you would feel for the life they now lead at Serramonte. I think he had the good sense to understand this, for he spoke of passing the winter at Florence. These Cecchi have always been the rivals of the Balducci for the last five centuries. Your marriage would put an end to the traditionary feud between us. You are the last Balducci, and without making any *mésalliance* you will become one of the richest women in Tuscany—the fortune of the Cecchi augments day by day.'

Here I interrupted him as I laid my two hands on his shoulders. 'Papa,' I said, looking straight into his eyes, 'you have always been the first love of my heart. To me you are father, mother, brother, everything in fact. You have always spoilt me disgracefully. I cannot remember your ever saying a sharp word to me, and I don't think there exists another girl in the world whose childhood has been as happy as mine. To your unbounded kindness I owe my seventeen years of perfect happiness. It is quite fair that after all you have done for

me you should have the right to ask me to do something for you. If you ask me, I am ready to marry this Carlo whom I detest, to enter this family whom I abhor, but think well before you demand this sacrifice of me. I warn you I will do it unhesitatingly if you say one word—just as I would take a plunge, closing eyes, nose, and mouth and away, it will be no more hard to do than that! Only — ah!' I cried passionately, 'why was not this terrible proposal made a fortnight sooner?'

'What do you mean?'

'I should have accepted it on the spot, without a moment's doubt, to please you, father darling, to set you free from your great anxiety —but now it is too late! I cannot! I cannot! I know I should die—marry this man I do not love! shall never love!—I cannot, because——'

'Because?' he repeated, very tenderly drawing me to him.

'Because—oh! because I love another!' I stammered, hiding my crimson face in his waistcoat.

With a mother's tenderness he made me sit on his knee and pressed me to his heart as he smoothed my tangled locks. 'Tell me every-

thing, *chérie*,' he murmured with infinite tenderness.

I asked nothing better, and so I told him all that had filled my head and my heart, since my first meeting with Mario Arsina, the account of which made him laugh.

'And——' he said at last hesitatingly, 'are you certain he returns your feeling?'

'Not in the least—I know nothing.'

'Has he ever said anything to lead you to think he would be happy to take possession of your dear little self?'

Never—but—do you think that proves he does not love me? That he never will, papa?'

He seemed lost in thought. 'It may simply prove that he is a man of great delicacy of feeling,' he replied after a moment. 'He has no fortune, and he knows that you are rich. I know enough of him to be certain that he is no fortune-hunter, and I believe him to be utterly incapable of any dishonourable action whatever. It is true he has run into debt, so have I terribly! who has not? save these fine gentlemen at Serramonte, they are the only people in the world who have no debts. But I declare they will soon be involved too, if

Carlo allows himself such licence in the matter of flaming cravats and white gloves. So, Carina, you are not disposed to let yourself be dragged to the altar by a cruel father, as a victim destined for sacrifice? You have made up your mind to let me end my days on straw, and force me to beg my bread at the gates of Ventaglia?'

'No, papa,' I said quickly, 'if Mario Arsina is the noble, generous, unselfish character you believe him to be, and if by chance he—he loves me, there is a very simple means of reconciling his heart and his delicacy. Let him give me the power of paying all your debts, and freeing you from these Cecchi and all your other creditors, and then he can marry me without my fortune, while Ventaglia will be always yours.'

He pinched my chin as he said, laughing, 'Well I declare! how clever your calculations are! What a brilliant pupil Mademoiselle Fournier has turned out! You have lost sight of one thing, though. Before disposing of your fortune in my favour, and yourself in favour of Arsina, we must know whether he is equally ready to offer you his heart and his hand. The hand is easily

given, but the heart—I thought—they told me —I fancied——'

'What, papa?'

'Oh, nothing!' he answered, correcting himself and sighing. 'So, Carina, I shall be compelled to go to Serramonte and beard these lions in their den: what a task! Perhaps it would be better to write! You must write me the rough copy of a letter, but no! happy thought! Suppose we ask Mademoiselle Fournier to write it? She would do it to perfection. What a pity it was not her hand that they wanted instead of yours! How she would have lorded it in that household! She could have studied arithmetic to her heart's content.'

While he was speaking I suddenly remembered what till then I had quite forgotten—the promise exacted by Beata.

'Papa! you must not write,' I said, 'and you must not go to Serramonte. I will go myself. I promised Beata I would take no step whatever either about marriage or anything else just now without consulting her.'

He made a gesture of annoyance. 'A most imprudent promise!' he replied. 'Madame

Mohrenstein will naturally do all in her power to persuade you to accept her brother's proposal. Take care, do not let yourself be bewitched, she knows how to coax! She says few words, but her eyes are terribly eloquent. She can do everything with those eyes of hers. I have never seen any like them. They are lit up by a light like the reflection of the moon on a black lake. By just looking at you, she may persuade you perhaps that you will be the happiest woman in the world if you follow her example, and marry a person you do not love. . . . But you will not allow yourself to do that. No! no! my darling, my treasure, my precious child!' he cried, as he covered me with kisses and caresses. 'It must not be, I will not allow it. I want you to be happy, as happy as your mother and I were (if that is possible), and you can only be so if your marriage is one of love. Your mother! her parents refused to give her to me, for they said we were much too young, she was seventeen, I twenty. I adored her—they said it was only a passing affection, it would never last! and yet it lasts still, spite of all I do to try and cure myself. No! no! my darling, you shall not marry Carlo Cecchi;—forget

everything I told you about the state of my affairs. Go at once to Serramonte; tell them straight out, that you decline the honour they offer you. My Palma shall marry no one but the man of her own choice. Now, it is I who forbid you to marry this gentleman; I will not allow you even to think of it, and you will obey me, will you not? I shall persist in refusing to give my consent to this marriage, even if you came kneeling at my feet bathed in tears with dishevelled locks, which, by the bye,' he added, 'you have at present.'

We laughed together like a couple of children, but I soon grew serious and thoughtful, and noticing this, he asked, 'Well, what is the matter now?'

'Mario Arsina,' I stammered.

'True! poor little woman. This is unhappily the first wish of yours I have not the power to gratify. What can I do? Try to discover his intentions? I can't, though, ask his hand for my daughter, it is not the custom, and besides——' He stopped suddenly, and seemed o consider. 'Let me ask you one question.'

'What, papa?'

'Have you ever spoken to your friend

Madame Mohrenstein of your feeling towards Mario Arsina?'

'Yes, once—a very long time ago.'

'Ah! what did she say?'

'That I must forget it, think no more about it, that it was childish.'

'Ah! just as I thought. Now listen to me, Carina. As you are going to see her to-day, speak to her again about Mario Arsina and your feeling for him: and you will be careful to explain that he has done nothing to encourage this sentiment, and that it is precisely this apparent indifference on his part which grieves you. You understand me, dear? You must tell her all that, and one thing you must promise me—if for some reason or other Madame Mohrenstein advises you to think no more of Mario, to give up all idea of marrying him, you will follow her advice. It is not too late, and I will help you to forget him. I will do my very best. I will try and distract your thoughts; we will travel, we will go to Paris, and settle down somewhere in the neighbourhood of the Parc Monceau, and there we will give a few balls; I have such heaps of friends. They will all welcome you as you deserve; I

shall not be at all sorry to show you off a little, to order you dresses worthy of your dear little self!'

I burst out into a peal of laughter. 'And the money to pay for all this!—and your debts, father?'

'Bah!' he replied with his inimitable grace, 'we shall always find means of arranging those matters.'

'Oh! horrors!' I cried suddenly, 'the breakfast bell is ringing, and just look at me!'

'I see something charming and very dearly loved,' he replied as he kissed the tips of his fingers to me, while I rushed to my room to make myself presentable.

When I announced my intention of going to Serramonte, to Mademoiselle, she declared I could not possibly do so save under her escort, and to this I readily agreed, though I warned her beforehand that I must speak to Beata quite alone.

'You place great confidence in Madame Mohrenstein,' she said with rather a bitter smile, 'and I am not surprised—people of like sentiments always draw together, enthusiasts always understand each other. Naturally I have nothing to say against this—sympathy and

confidence are not made to order. However, I do feel rather surprised at the ease with which you pour out your confidences to a stranger, while to me, who stand in your mother's place, you say nothing. I am well aware that gratitude is rarely the reward of devotion and self-sacrifice, but I did hope to meet with a little more delicacy after the earnest zeal——'

What a relief when the carriage arrived! Without waiting for the man-servant to come down from the box, I sprang lightly in from the first step of the porch, and would willingly, if I could, have put half the world between myself and Mademoiselle Fournier, so that I might no longer encounter the flood of her bitter eloquence.

Under the *loggia* adorned with fine marble statues, now dilapidated and encumbered with bundles of maize stalks which were drying in the sun, Count Cecchi, with a cap of dirty velvet on his head, was pacing to and fro, holding in his hand a bundle of newspapers, which he kept even when he received us; he came towards me, bowing and staring at me through his spectacles. I felt that he was picking me to pieces, and I could not shake off

the idea that he looked upon me as a machine he intended to purchase. I met his scrutiny on my part with somewhat of insolence.

'I wish to see Beata,' I said without any parleying.

He winked his eyes as if to say he perfectly understood the aim of my visit, and this put the finishing stroke to my exasperation. He evidently thought that the honour the Cecchi deigned to offer me had overwhelmed me with joy, and that I had come to pour out my transports to Beata. I passed him rudely, my nose in the air, and proceeded towards the house, but I had no sooner reached the further end of the *loggia* than I was seized with remorse. I was ashamed of my churlishness; at no price would I have had Count Cecchi as my father-in-law; but I had done wrong to forget that he was an old man, and a gentleman. I was on the point of retracing my steps to apologise to him, when happily he was monopolised by Mademoiselle Fournier. I crossed the immense hall decorated by the famous frescoes of Volteranno; it was a strange mixture of almost princely luxury and sordid squalor. All that was old, was sumptuous, all that had only existed

during the last fifty years, was only suited to a peasant's cottage. Piles of dirty torn newspapers were heaped up on straw chairs; broken pipes, tattered almanacs, empty bottles, littered up the splendid gilt consoles, whose tops of precious marble were encrusted with ancient Florentine mosaics rivalling those of the Pitti Palace itself.

It was necessary to step carefully on the uneven Venetian pavement, in which were great holes filled with the dust of years, while shreds of carpet, with absolutely nothing but the discoloured foundation left, looked like grey patches in the midst of the surrounding dirt.

At the foot of the staircase that led to the first floor, I met the stout Fräulein, who seemed to be watching for me. She made me a sign to follow her; in the middle of the flight of stairs, up which she went puffing like a whale, she stopped, and then turning to me she said with the coarsest German accent, 'Ill, ill!' laying one fat finger on her huge chest.

'Ill? who? you?' I asked, in surprise, seeing her corpulent person.

She pointed with her fat finger upstairs—'She—not me.'

'Ah! Beata!'

'Yes, yes!' she said, delighted at being understood. 'She is an angel—an angel!' She opened a gilded door adorned with coats of arms, and I found myself in a huge room. A beautiful fresco covered the ceiling, a gigantic bed with a canopy surmounted by ostrich plumes occupied an alcove, separated from the rest of the apartment by pillars and a balustrade of red Siena marble. It was hung with magnificent blue satin curtains with gold-coloured foliage, relieved by designs of raised flowers and fantastic birds. The same rich material covered the walls, on which hung Venetian mirrors in their tarnished gilt frames, most of them broken and spoilt. The floor was of brick in very bad condition, which was not even hidden by the tattered strips of carpet scattered here and there. Near a huge window, the greater part of the panes of which were cracked, sat Beata, upright, her hands crossed on a book with gilt edges.

She rose and welcomed me as if she had expected my visit. I noticed even that the arm-chair, which was placed opposite to the straw one she occupied, looked as if it had been prepared for me. She was as colourless as the white flannel dressing-gown which she wore.

'I expected you,' she said as she took both my hands in hers. 'You have not forgotten the promise you gave me? That is right.'

'Beata, I fancy I have nothing new to tell you about the proposal that was made to my father this morning.'

'Nothing—fortunately I was informed of it beforehand.'

'And of course you are going to advise me to accept him?' I said, rather perplexed.

'What does your own heart tell you?'

'It is divided between an ardent desire of giving my dear father a proof of my devotion, and the horror I feel at the very thought of selling myself for money.'

'I knew it would be so, Carina.'

'But, Beata,' I said, rather disconcerted by her immovable calm, 'what do you say? Do you think it can be my duty to devote myself, to sacrifice myself?'

'If your father requires it——'

'My father require it! The truth is, he forbids me even to think of marrying your brother.'

She gave a sigh of relief. 'Oh! thank God! I expected this! You are fortunate,

Palma! Your father is good and kind, he loves you. You are very fortunate. Love him truly, *chérie.*'

'I do, with all my heart!'

'And obey him.'

'I ask nothing better.'

'And now listen to me attentively and try and remember all that I am going to tell you. Your father must not give a decided answer for some days. Meanwhile he must act with promptitude, and you must advise him.'

She rose, unlocked an old writing-table, which, as it opened, gave forth a groan, as if breathing out the terrible secrets that had been shut up in its recesses, and drawing out a paper, she asked, 'Does your father know the name of the person who has bought up all his debts?'

'No, he never thought of asking his name.'

'Just as I expected! I will tell you his name. His sole creditor is *my* father. He has arranged everything so as to get yours entirely in his power.'

'But why?' I asked innocently.

'Your father will easily understand his motive, he knows how eagerly the Cecchi have always coveted the possession of Ventaglia. If

your father were willing to part with it rather than accept Carlo's proposal, all might be arranged very easily, but I know how you both cling to it, and I desire to avert from you a great sorrow which would also be a public scandal. My father is determined to foreclose, if your marriage with Carlo does not take place.

I do not, however, choose that you should submit to such humiliation. You will see on this paper the exact amount of the sum total of Count Balducci's debts—it is a large one. I think, however, by new loans and the sale of the pictures and objects of art in your palace at Florence your father will be able to raise it, but you understand, it must be done as quickly as possible. I know he is rather careless about business—he attaches but little importance to money for its own sake, and only looks upon it as a means of giving to others the greatest possible amount of enjoyment. My father is determined to get possession of Ventaglia, and if the project of your marriage with Carlo fails, then he is resolved to ruin your father, and, alas! nothing is more easy; he will immediately have a forced but legal sale of the whole property. Now do you understand this matter?'

I trembled with indignation. 'Oh, what a wicked man! what horrid people!' I cried in my anger. 'But forgive me, Beata! He is your father.'

'Carina,' she answered quietly, 'he is not wicked. He is energetic, determined, accustomed to see everything yield before his will, and to him, business comes before everything else.'

'And this wretched Carlo, who has plotted it all, had the audacity to want to marry me! Oh, Beata, how I pity you having such relations!'

'Hush, dear!' she said gently, as she folded me in her arms, 'it does not become us to judge our relations. We must respect and obey them. We need so much forgiveness ourselves!'

'I do certainly, but you are a saint. I feel I ought to kneel when I speak to you. How can I ever thank you for the service you are rendering us in this crisis? If my father had not been forewarned, he never could have escaped from the machinations of yours.'

'I earnestly beg you,' she answered, 'not to speak of this matter to any one but your father.

You can understand I am doing my own father a very bad turn now. He depended on me to induce you to accept Carlo. I daresay he thinks that this very moment I am laying before you the advantages that would accrue to you from this union. If he knew that I had betrayed his confidence he would be very angry with me, as he would of course have a right to be. I am promoting the family interests very badly. But I cannot resist the dictates of my heart. I love you, Palma! I loved you from the day we first met. Do you remember it? on the terrace of Serramonte-Alto, when you came so prettily up to me, and put your arms around me, saying as you kissed me, 'You are sad, I should like to comfort you.' As for me, Carina, I do not wish to have to comfort you later on, and unfortunately I should have to do so often and often if you came to live at Serramonte. Poor little spoilt child! so thoughtless, so light-hearted—it must not be. You shall not be sacrificed for a wretched question of money! You must be happy, Palma, and I covet no greater joy than the power of helping you to be so.'

I was kneeling by her side as she said this,

and bursting into tears, I hid my face in her lap.

'What is the matter?' she asked with tender solicitude. 'Tears! Palma darling, what is the matter? Tell me everything.'

'Oh, I am so unhappy! I am ashamed of myself, ashamed of my tears, and yet I cannot help crying!'

'Well, *chérie*, cry here, my heart will understand all your troubles if you will trust them to me, but I shall understand your silence if you would rather not tell me.'

No, Beata! I want to tell you everything,' I said, as I rose and resolutely dashed away my tears. 'This morning I offered up a prayer, so fervent, so earnest, that I feel sure it has been heard, and I will shed no more tears. I have besought God, cost what it may and at the risk of bitter sorrow, to give me the right to love Mario Arsina.'

A change passed over her face, her lips trembled slightly, and with her hands tightly clasped together, she said almost in a whisper, 'That was a terrible and unwise prayer to offer.'

'Yes, was it not? I was very wrong, I

know. All the more because I am absolutely in the dark as to his feelings toward me. Perhaps he detests me.'

'That is not the least likely. But has he ever said anything that would lead you to think he cares for you?' she asked.

'Never. It is true he has only been at Ventaglia for a fortnight, but then—a fortnight is a long time when we are always together, from morning to night. Sometimes he appears to avoid me, and that breaks my heart. Then again, on the other hand, sometimes I feel quite light-hearted, for he seems to enjoy talking to me. This is almost always when I talk of you.'

'I am not surprised,' she answered with a slight effort. 'You know we have been old friends almost from our childhood. My poor dear grandmother was very fond of Mario, and he can never forget her. His gratitude would prevent his ever doing so.'

'He has never been to see you since he came to us?' I asked. 'I am surprised at that.'

'But it is perfectly natural, Carina. He knows nothing of my father or Carlo except by meeting them the other day at Ventaglia, and I never receive any visitors but yourself.'

'That is a pity.'

'Why?'

'You could have done me a great kindness.'

'What is it?'

'You could, without asking, you understand, —you could try to find out what Mario thinks about me. If I am displeasing in his sight, I would rather know it; it would help me perhaps, not to forget him—that is impossible—but to resign myself to loving him in silence without the power of telling him anything. It would be quite natural to me that he should not deem me worthy of his love. To me he seems so great, so infinitely superior to a little ignorant goose like myself. I know no one but my father who can be compared to him. But I! why should I dare to wish to share his life? I do not deserve the love of a heart like his. I could only offer my unbounded devotion. My one ambition would be to make him happy, to anticipate his slightest wish, to place my heart under his feet, lest they should be wounded by the stones in his path. I should only ask him in return to love me a little—very little. Oh! I would not be exacting, a very little would satisfy me, because I know so well

that I do not deserve anything great, I am so capricious, so badly brought up!'

She pressed me tightly to her heart, her breath going quick and fast. 'Yes, yes!' she almost gasped, 'that is what true love should be! just that! A love formed of devotion, self-forgetfulness!' She held me in her arms, and I felt her tears drop on my neck.

'Listen, Palma,' she said after a long silence. 'I charge you with a message to Mario Arsina. Tell him I wish to see him, to speak about my grandmother and the old days, that I am too ill to go to Ventaglia, where you have a house full of visitors, and that I beg him to come and see me.'

'Here?'

'No! no!' she answered quickly, 'not here. I might not be able to see him here without witnesses. At Serramonte-Alto, where I shall spend the day to-morrow. Tell him to come by the little path under the olive-trees, the one you showed him. I promise to let you know the result of this interview. Now we must part. We must meet again, Palma. Be happy, dear little girl; be happy,' she said as she pressed a fervent kiss on my forehead. 'Don't forget anything I told you, and, above all, advise

your father to act with the greatest prudence and promptitude,' she said as she led me to the door.

Mademoiselle Fournier was waiting for me in the *loggia*, apparently absorbed in the perusal of a newspaper. By the way she threw it down on the table, I knew she was in a bad temper; and this, I understood at once, was caused by the absence of the Count, who had doubtless left her without ceremony as soon as he wearied of her conversation.

'My dearest child,' she began as soon as we were in the carriage, 'Count Cecchi, who has previously honoured me with his confidence, was kind enough to inform me just now of his earnest wish that you should enter his family. He was good enough also to say that he relied on me to plead the cause of Count Carlo. Naturally I replied that my intervention would not be needed, that you were far too sensible not to appreciate the advantages of such an alliance. Unhappily, I have not entirely succeeded in making you my own ideal, as far as education goes, of a young girl destined to become an earnest practical wife. Influences, I much regret, have arisen to check and over-

power mine. But still I dare to hope, that once placed in different circumstances, and under reasonable authority, you would soon feel the necessity for a radical reform. For myself, my task will be ended, unless indeed you share the wish Monsieur Cecchi has kindly expressed to me—that of seeing me under his roof, as a friend and counsellor of——'

Really I wondered at my own patience while I listened to her! 'I hope you will be very happy in your new post,' I replied very politely. 'I think papa will be very grieved to part with you after so many years spent with us——'

'I think you do not quite understand me,' she said, hesitating slightly. 'I desire no new post, I only offer to go with you after your marriage. I imagine the impending change in Count Balducci's circumstances would render my presence near him quite useless and scarcely pleasant.'

'What change?' I asked impatiently.

'My dear child, you have an extremely irritating way of appearing not to understand allusions to matters that delicacy requires should be touched upon discreetly.'

'No, I understand nothing, I do not choose to understand,' I said maliciously, 'and I do not know what my father can have said to you.'

'Nothing, oh, nothing at all! It is not to me, still less to you, that he would speak on such a subject.'

'Now this time I desire to understand what you mean,' I said, seriously annoyed. 'Tell me what you know,' I cried, stamping my foot angrily.

'My dear child! How ill bred! All I know is this, that your poor dear father's affairs are in such a desperate state, that you must not be surprised at his wishing to improve them by this brilliant marriage.'

'You know very little of my father if you think him capable of forcing me for his own interests, to enter on a marriage which is hateful to me!'

'My dear child,' she said calmly, '*your* marriage has nothing to do with it, I am speaking of his.'

I sprang from my seat. 'His! with the Princess Dell' Orso! Who told you? who dared to tell you?'

'My own eyes and ears,' she replied primly.

As I alighted from the carriage with my cheeks flaming and my lips compressed, I went straight to my father's smoking-room; there I found him stretched on the divan and absorbed in reading a review. Happily he was quite alone, for I could not have kept down the words that rushed to my lips, had there been any number of witnesses.

'Papa,' I said furiously through my clenched teeth, 'why did you take the trouble to lay before me Carlo Cecchi's propositions? You had already arranged a far more ingenious means of paying your debts and restoring your shattered fortunes.'

'What?' he asked, astounded. 'What is the matter? What do you mean?'

'Yes,' I said ironically. 'Rather than make me marry Carlo Cecchi, do you marry Isabella Dell' Orso. She is nearly as rich as he is.'

'For shame!' he said indignantly. 'How dare you speak or think in this way? How dare you imagine me capable of such conduct? Marry a woman I do not love merely for her money—I?—it would be infamous!'

I sprang towards him. 'Papa mio! papa

caro! Is that true? tell me. Is it really true you do not love her? Oh, papa, how delighted I am! Tell me again you do not love her, that you love me better than any one else in the whole world.'

He was sitting down, and as I stood before him I covered his head with my kisses. He put his arms round my waist and leant his head against me. 'Listen, Palma, you are no longer a child, you are growing into a woman, I can tell you everything. Poor Isabella!—I do not think I have ever misled her. I did my best to love her. I sought to distract my thoughts in her society, and with others beside her. I never succeeded. Unfortunately I fancy she cares for me, but I cannot give her my heart in return, I cannot! The memory of your mother always comes between me and her, and every other woman in the world. I confess to you, Palma, I have done all in my power to banish this memory, it was wrong I know, but then I was so young, and am still. Enough! I cannot confess to my own daughter! No, Palma, if you are jealous, as I fear you are, reassure yourself. I will never of my own free will, marry Isabella; at the same time I tell you

I mistrust myself. I have not a determined will. My firmest resolutions are always liable to be set aside by the sudden impulses of my heart or my imagination. You see I know myself thoroughly. I am not cast in bronze like these Cecchi. There have been times when I was on the point of uttering irrevocable words which I should have regretted for the rest of my life, as for instance the other day, the day of our fête.

'If I yielded to certain temptations I should regret it to my dying day. So I feel,—you see yourself—it would be better, with a disposition like mine, to fly from the danger, to travel, to go away at least for the present. See, whilst reading this review just now, this special article by my old friend Antonio de Angelis, I was tempted to follow his example, to start for some distant expedition. He proposes to go overland from Aden to Muscat, crossing the desert of Detma, it sounds very tempting. What do you say?'

'It is a very long way off, father darling.'

'Well, so much the better. It is what I must do to free myself from the meshes of a net in which I dread being caught, like a fly in a spider's web. Look here, Palma, your

mother was the idol of my life. When she left me, she took with her part of myself, which I shall never regain save when I rejoin her. But am I not too sinful ever to be where she is? She was so sweet, so pure, so loving, so angelically good! Her one idea was to make every one around her happy. While I—I have not done a single good thing in all my life. But we have said enough about myself! Tell me now all about your visit.' I did so to the smallest details. 'What a man that Cecchi is,' cried my father with profound admiration, when I told him of the blow with which he was threatened. 'He really is wonderful! I should like to congratulate him. Never, no never, should I have been capable of originating such an idea. I am an idiot compared to him. Do you know, Carina, it is an immense service that Madame Mohrenstein has rendered us, and a most unselfish one too. So you spoke to her about Mario and she did not scold you for so foolishly letting your heart be captured by this handsome young fellow, little imprudent creature that you are?'

'No, she even seemed to think it was quite natural, and she has promised to try and find

out what he thinks of me. She appeared quite anxious the marriage should take place. If you only knew how tender she was, how sympathetic! What a woman she is!'

'You are right. I thought I understood women tolerably well, having lived amongst them all my life; but this woman—ah, well, I am baffled! With her matchless beauty, and worse still, with that indefinable gift which gives a woman full power over all hearts, something much more to be feared than *coqueterie!* And how does she manage to be satisfied with the life she now leads, and with such a husband?'

'She is satisfied with it, because she is an angel, but she will die of it.'

'Perhaps not—if she should meet some day a man who adores her as she deserves to be. But mark me, if I were a woman eager to keep any man's love for myself, I would allow him to mix with the most accomplished flirts in the world, without feeling a spark of jealousy; but Madame Mohrenstein!—no, women like her are not loved like the rest, they are adored!'

'That is what I feel, father, I simply venerate her.'

'You are right, you are right.'

I never knew how the following day passed; the hours seemed like ages, for I felt my fate was being decided. Mario, to whom I had given Beata's message, had started very early in the morning with his gun on his shoulder. My father, doubtless to distract my thoughts, proposed that we should call on friends at a very distant villa. They kept us to dinner, and we did not return to Ventaglia till quite late. When I was in my own room, Generosa put into my hand a small parcel which the fat Fräulein had brought for me.

Spite of my burning impatience, I waited to open it till I was quite alone. It was a case containing a very beautiful bracelet, a wide band of gold with a superb sapphire in the centre. As I opened the case a letter fell out. My fingers tingled, my heart beat quickly. I felt as if I were about to read my sentence of life or death.

I read these words, 'Your prayer has been granted, Palma. You may give your whole heart to Mario. Love him as you feel you can do, with all the ardour, the devotion of your nature. Be happy, Palma. It depends

only on yourself to be perfectly so. I send you this bracelet beforehand, one I have always worn. I may not be near you on your wedding day to give it you then. The doctor orders me to the sea, and I start to-morrow early. May God bless you and make your happiness as complete as it can be here below.'

I fell on my knees to pour out my gratitude to God, gratitude as deep as my prayer had been heartfelt.

Next day I did not know what to do. I dared not leave my room lest I should meet Mario. I felt it would be impossible to hide from him the feelings with which my heart overflowed. Could I accost him with polite indifference, give him my hand in a common-place way, as I would to any other of my father's guests? In my agony I watched the luncheon hour draw nearer and nearer, then I knew I should be obliged to go down, meet him and talk to him on indifferent subjects.

A servant came to inform me my father was waiting to see me in the smoking-room. As I entered I saw Mario there; my father held out his arms and I took refuge in them.

'I sent for you to ask you what you think of a piece of folly this gentleman is anxious to commit,' he said brightly. 'Fancy, he is thinking of marrying a little *contadina* he met three years ago, stealing cherries, with bare feet and streaming locks. He has such a high opinion of your judgment that he will only enter on this marriage if you approve.'

Hiding my face on my father's breast I began to sob like a little goose.

'Carina,' he said tenderly, 'don't distress yourself so. No one will force you to be his wife if you dislike the idea. If you do not want him, you have only to say the word.'

I did not dare raise my eyes to Mario. I only stretched out to him my trembling hand, which he stooped down and kissed.

'And now to lunch,' said my father, who I knew wished to hide his own emotion. 'It has been announced already, and we must not keep the others waiting; we can discuss business matters later. That is to say, we shall not have much time to-day. Just fancy, *chérie*, this fickle *fiancé* of yours is anxious to leave you at once. He insists on the absolute necessity of my immediate departure for

Florence, to try and raise as quickly as possible the money I must have, to set me free from these gentlemen at Serramonte. Once this is done, I shall retire altogether. Arrange everything as you like, I cede all my power and authority to you, and I am delighted at the very thought. You will make me an allowance and pay my travelling expenses, as I mean to join Antonio di Angelis in Arabia. Only you must hurry on your marriage a little, for I think he means to leave Aden in the early part of the New Year, which is close at hand now. Quick! let us go to the dining-room now.'

The dictates of the most ordinary prudence ought to have counselled my father to keep absolute silence respecting my engagement, at least till a decisive answer had been sent to the Cecchi, and, above all, till he had realised the sum needed to paralyse their machinations. But my father never could keep any secrets save those that were confided to him by others, his own he always appeared to look on as public property.

He excused himself gaily to his guests for his delay. He had very important business to

settle, he said with an almost comic mixture of gravity and emotion.

Making a sign to the butler, he cried, 'Beppo, go and look for that special wine from Cyprus, you know the kind we only drink at weddings or baptisms. Not the famous bottle which was opened when my daughter was born; they gave her a drop to taste, per Bacco! and she liked it so much she would soon have been tipsy, if we had allowed her. That bottle she will finish on her wedding day. Your health, Palma!'

His glance rested on Mario and myself, seeming to surround us both with the same tenderness, as he held out to each of us his glass filled with the golden sparkling wine. In his softened looks every one could easily read the secret it was his interest to keep closely hidden for the moment.

Mademoiselle Fournier drew me aside as soon as luncheon was over. 'My dear child,' she began, 'I do not know whether I ought to attach any great importance to your father's words, I know he is always ready to joke, and that he does not always weigh the meaning of his words, but I think it is my duty to point

out to you, that as you are just at present the object of most flattering attention from our illustrious and noble neighbours, your behaviour with Captain Arsina strikes me as unseemly. I have watched you carefully just now at table, and I am sorry to be obliged to tell you I am not the only one who did so. I see nothing to wonder at in this penniless officer's paying you court; you are an heiress, and to him marriage with you would be an extraordinary piece of good fortune. He is brilliant and quite clever enough to succeed in his designs with persons so impractical, so ill balanced as—— But it is my duty to warn you while yet there is time.'

'Warn me of what?'

'There have been very unpleasant stories about Captain Arsina going about.'

'I wish to know them.'

'Well! as you *will* have them! It is said that he paid assiduous court to a girl he believed to be very wealthy—poor himself and crippled with debt, it was a very good thing for him. The marriage was arranged, and when owing to circumstances which were not told me, the girl lost the fortune on which he was counting, Monsieur Arsina retired immediately.'

'That cannot be true,' I replied rudely.

'I only hope it is not, for his sake, and still more for yours, if, as I fear, you have been mad enough to prefer the handsome figure and uniform of this soldier of fortune, to the solid, substantial advantages of the alliance which has been offered you.'

'What would you have, dear Mademoiselle?' I answered regretfully. 'I am really sorry for you, I have always been a hateful pupil in your eyes. Spite of all your efforts, you have never succeeded in teaching me arithmetic. It always seems to me that a heart joined to another heart is worth infinitely more than the longest column of figures placed one after the other. It is not my fault—perhaps I have inherited it. That kind of arithmetic I get from my father; I fear I shall never learn the other.'

'May you never repent it,' she said drily.

From that day she announced her intention of retiring to her own family, to enjoy a much-needed rest after the fatigue of educating me, and, above all, that she might not sanction with her approval the piece of folly I was about to commit. She packed up her trunks and left Ventaglia shortly before my marriage, not

wishing, she declared, to be in any way responsible for it.

When my father had announced my approaching marriage to the Cecchi, having paid them all the notes-of-hand they held in their possession, he said to me laughing, 'Now, we must prepare for a resumption of the traditional feuds. The Cecchi are not people to forget the checkmate we have just given them. You must be always on your guard. I do not count in the game now;—it is Mario specially with whom they are furious, but he is prudent, with a clearer head than mine. If ever they discover the disinterested part Madame Mohrenstein has played in this business, I fear they will make her pay dearly for it. After what we have just done they have no longer any power over us, but, my poor darling, it will take some time to repair the breach we have made in your fortune. I believe that it would really have been more to your interest had we consented to give up Ventaglia, spite of the wrench it would have been to me. I am the last of my name, and Ventaglia would have passed away with me. But Mario would not hear of it.'

'Dear Mario! I am grateful to him for this;

he knows how dear Ventaglia is to me. I love every stone of it, every tree, every blade of grass. I thank Mario! I should be perfectly happy if I could spend all my life at Ventaglia without ever leaving it!'

'Then you would allow your husband to follow his regiment alone, from garrison to garrison.'

'True, I did not think of that. It seemed to me it would be so sweet to stay here, quite alone, only we two, whilst we were waiting for you, papa.'

'Would that be really what you wish?' asked Mario.

'There is nothing I desire more—but as it is impossible——'

'There is a very simple way, though—to send in my resignation.'

'Come now, Mario,' cried my father,' you would not do such a foolish thing! When a man has a career before him he cannot value it too highly. If I had had the happiness of having one, I should not perhaps have frittered away my time as I have done, in foolish, useless things; and instead of wasting my fortune in stupid inventions, I might have used it in

amusing my friends, making them happy, and giving pleasure to every one. It is want of occupation that has led me into all my past follies. A brilliant officer like yourself ought not to shatter his career, and become a planter of cabbages. Just at present Ventaglia appears utterly delightful, because you are both in love: try a conjugal *tête-à-tête* and then a little garrison life before you decide between the two.'

'I do not need to do so,' replied Mario. 'I have already made my choice.'

'So have I.'

'Little goose,' said my father. 'So you would really let him give up this pretty blue uniform which suits him so well? Take care, Mario, it is very imprudent! I warn you, it was your uniform she fell in love with first, she even confessed it to me. If you lose your right to wear it, you will lose your prestige.'

I think my look reassured Mario amply, as to any anxiety he might have had on this point.

CHAPTER VII

SEATED under the shade of the olive-trees, on turf spangled with anemones and Easter daisies, my hands clasped round my knees, my gaze drinking in the blue of the clear sky, I gave myself up to the delicious impressions of the spring. In me, around me, all was pure enjoyment and a sense of well-being. I had been married just three months; the springtide of my happiness, like that of the year, was in full force.

Around the gnarled trunks of the olive-trees which wrapped me in their luminous shade, were scattered violets and ranunculuses, while golden-coloured jonquils raised their corollas on their stiff stalks, countless bees humming round them and gathering honey from their cups. A scent of honey caused by a mixture of all the perfumes of the bursting vegetation, floated in the air, the

light chequered by the grey foliage of the olive-trees played softly on the grey stones carpeted with velvety moss which held together the olive roots, and on fragments of rocks between which darted lizards as green as emeralds. Little green and blue tomtits flitted busily through the branches, dragging after them long trails of straw to build their nests.

How I love the olive-trees of my own land! A family feeling has always made them dear to me. They have seen me grow up, they have watched my childish games, the escapades of my joyous youth. Now they were sheltering my happiness as a young bride. It almost seemed as if they had striven to testify their sympathy with my joy, by yielding this year quite an exceptional harvest.

All the winter long the hills had resounded with the *stornelli* (peasant ballads) in which the young girls answered each other, as they were busy from morning to night gathering the olives. Now the fresh oil was flowing from the presses in a golden flood, which ensured the wealth of the country-folk for the whole year. At all the olive-yards, there were drying in the sun great piles of round wicker

baskets, in which is placed under the press the thick velvety pulp, the remains of the olives that have been previously crushed under mill-stones turned by oxen.

Mario had started very early that morning to visit one of our oil-presses on the summit of the hill. I knew he would have to come down through this olive wood to return to Ventaglia, and I wanted to surprise him by going to meet him there. He rode long distances now to overlook all our distant farms, for he had taken up the life and occupations of a country gentleman, in real earnest.

Taught, I daresay, by the disastrous results of my father's experiments, he re-established everywhere the old cultivation and traditional management. He set himself to perfect these, not to introduce innovations :—Fortunato therefore was enchanted, and already adored his young master.

After our marriage we had paid a short visit to Milan, where Mario introduced me to my new relatives; then we accompanied my father to Brindisi, from whence he embarked for Arabia.

He started as if he were going for a country

walk, so gay, so full of spirits and energy that I never dreamt of being anxious about him. He stood laughing on the bridge of the vessel, chaffing Mario, who was much graver and in less exuberant spirits, on his happiness as a newly-married man.

Poor father! If he could have foreseen the future! His farewell was tender, but so it always was, and we were accustomed to frequent separations, for he travelled so much. As he had always been a detestable correspondent I knew I must not worry myself over his long silences. For three months I had only had one letter from him, dated from Aden, on the day of his arrival. I knew I should have to wait a long time before receiving any further news from him.

The grove of olives sloped down a rapid incline, cut into terraces and faced by low walls of grey stone: at the bottom of the ravine, wound through the wild glen a tiny brook, whose silvery tinkle reached me where I sat. The other side of the hill, looking to the north, was thickly wooded with chestnut trees. Their tender young buds were just beginning to peep through their hard wrinkled

coverings. At their feet grew a tangled thicket of flowering broom, myrtles, and tall white heath, whose long branches of blossom smelt like orange-flowers. My eyes wandered with keen pleasure over the grey green foliage of the olive-trees. Here and there a peach-tree added its harmonious colouring of delicate rose-pink blossoms to the soft green around me. All was bright and smiling, a harmony of soft chastened tints, no harsh or discordant note coming to disturb this exquisite symphony of bright colours, sweet perfumes, and distant sounds.

My heart sang the words of this symphony, I was so happy! In the heaven of my happiness there was not a cloud as big as a man's hand to terrify me. I gave myself up completely, body and soul, to the sweet impressions of perfect bliss, awakened in me by this delicious, warm-scented spring air. An approaching step coming down the little rocky path, made the great Maremma dog which was with me prick up his ears. He began sniffing and wagging his tail, and was just going to spring forward when I held him down. 'Yes, Bindo, it is he, but let us keep quite still till he comes close

to us. He does not expect to see us here, and he will be pleased.'

Mario gave a cry of joyful surprise as he saw me, and I drew him down to my side: half-lying on the grass near him, I rested my head on his arm.

'Let us stay here a little, will you? It is so lovely,' I said with a sigh of pleasure. 'I was so happy just now, merely thinking of you. What is it now?'

'Dear Palma!'

'Oh, there is the first nightingale! do you hear it?' I asked, after a short silence. 'He sings less sweetly than my heart does, Mario, only I have a trouble, just one——'

'What is it, dear?'

'I am afraid of being happier than you are.'

'What nonsense!'

'No, it is not nonsense. On the contrary, it is a very serious well-grounded fear. My darling, you are so good, so perfect, so superior to every man I have ever known, *except* papa, that I can do nothing but admire you. But as for myself,—alas! you know how badly I have been brought up. I am ignorant, capricious, incapable of resisting the impulses

of the moment, which are not always good nor wise. No one ever took the trouble to correct my faults, my father approved of everything I did. Mademoiselle Fournier? well, I had only one idea when with her, which was to do the exact opposite of what she told me. You must promise me that for the future you will tell me honestly everything that you do not approve of in my conduct. I should be so broken-hearted if I ever grieved you. I want to become as good as you are, Mario, that you may love me as much as I love you.'

'Dear child!'

'Ah! if only I could become perfect like Beata,' I went on with a sigh. 'Poor Beata! By the bye, Mario, you never told me how she managed to tell you of my sentiments, and bring about our marriage. It was such a delicate mission, what did she say to you?'

He hesitated for a moment. 'You must ask her yourself when you see her again.'

'That I fear I shall not do for a long time. Even if she came back to Serramonte it would not be at all prudent for us to go there. We owe all our happiness to her, but I very much fear she has paid dearly for it.'

'Mario,' I continued, after a long silence, 'I made a pilgrimage this morning.'

'Where to?'

'Coming here I passed the farm with the famous cherry-tree. Oh, don't be afraid, I did not climb into the branches as I used to do! I contented myself with gathering some of its sprays of blossom; see! here they are in my dress. It was covered with flowers like a bridal bouquet. All the good people at the farm were so delighted to see me again! Ersilia showed me with great pride her two chubby rosy boys. The old mother bridled up as she spoke of you. "Such a handsome young man! When I see him ride past, I always fancy I see St. George as he looks in the picture at the church." It seems you often give her that pleasure—by the way, what takes you in that direction? It is the last of our farms in that part, for Serramonte begins on the opposite side of the little brook. Do you go there on a pilgrimage too?' I asked, laughing.

'I have often business to do there,' he said, with hesitation which I could not help noticing.

'Not at Serramonte itself, I hope,' I said with some uneasiness; 'frankly, at the risk of

your thinking me a little timid fool with a head full of wild ideas, I confess to you, I should not at all like to know you had met one of the Cecchi in some dark part of the wood, still less that you had gone to beard them in their break-neck fortress. You are not hiding anything from me, I hope?'

'I have never met the Cecchi. Do not be nervous, Palma, and do not torment yourself unnecessarily; I give you my word I will avoid them as far as I possibly can. We must go in now, for I expect an engineer, and I want to start him on his work before dinner.'

'What a great pity,' I said with a sigh, 'it is so delightful here!'

I rose with regret, and leaning on his arm I followed him through the olive wood, not without turning back every now and then to cast a last look at the spot I had just quitted. Alas! had I only known, I should have left it with still greater unwillingness!

At the door of my dressing-room I blew a last kiss from the tips of my fingers to Mario, who went at once to the engineer who was waiting for him. I changed my morning wrapper of muslin, for one of the elegant dresses my

father had ordered from Paris for my trousseau with such pleasure. He had taken an interest in the smallest details of it, and had chosen everything with the exquisite feminine taste which characterised him. I delighted to adorn myself for Mario when we were quite alone, and for a *tête-à-tête* dinner with him, I dressed myself with far more care and elegance than I would have done for one of my father's large receptions.

'Does la Signora know that Signora Beata has returned to Serramonte?' said Generosa as she was dressing my hair, a duty she would never allow any of the younger ladies'-maids to undertake.

'No!' I said, much surprised. 'Since when?'

'Oh! several days since, I don't know how many.'

'Who told you?'

'The postman—the old one-eyed cook up at Serramonte told him such things! Madonna mia! If this Jew had the least affection for his wife, he would not leave her a single hour at Serramonte. Fine care he takes of her, upon my word! He thinks of nothing but his little red and yellow bottles and his furnaces, where

he is always boiling things that burst, and will set the whole place on fire some of these days.'

'What do they do to her?'

'They beat her and leave her to die of hunger.'

'No! Generosa, that is really going too far. Well-educated people are not as quick with their hands as your people are.'

'Oh, indeed! is that so? It was just for that reason the old cook forced his way into the dining-room where the *padroni* had shut themselves up after dinner—such a dinner! polenta and codfish like the very poorest *contadini*. They were shouting so loud, banging about the bottles and the knives that he thought that they were going to cut the poor signora's throat. Is it only amongst people like us that parents beat their children? There is this difference any way, when this happens to a married daughter her husband defends her and strikes her parents back. Among ladies and gentlemen the husband lets them do as they like, and only looks after his phials and his bottles. My conscience, it makes my blood boil only to think of it!'

'If you only knew what pain it gives me to hear all this, Generosa!'

'I should think so, especially if what they say is true——' She stopped.

'What do they say? I must know.'

'They say it is all because of the signora and Signor Mario that they make her suffer so. They say—must I tell you everything?'

'Yes, everything, everything!'

They say Count Carlo wanted to marry you, my darling, and that it was Signora Beata who prevented the marriage taking place. As if you would ever have consented to be the wife of that hideous monkey, who is as ugly as sin and as wicked as a mameluke! The cook also heard that they accused Signora Beata of wanting to ruin the family by causing some business to fail, I don't know what, but something that would have brought them in millions! As if they had not already ten times more than they need, to live like misers as they do!'

I could not listen any longer to Generosa. The thought of all that Beata was suffering, wrung my heart. All my light-hearted happiness vanished instantly, and I longed to see Mario again and tell him what I had just heard.

I went down to the drawing-room, which was still empty. On the table I noticed a heap of letters brought by the postman, the same probably who had given Generosa all her information. The letters were all for Mario—none from my father. Without thinking, I took up a newspaper and opened it by way of restraining my impatience as I waited for Mario.

Suddenly a cloud seemed to pass before my eyes as they glanced carelessly over the column with the latest news; all the blood rushed to my temples with a singing in my ears, and the paper slipped from my powerless hands to the ground. My head fell back heavily on the back of the sofa, and for the first time in my life I lost consciousness.

When I came to myself, my eyes met those of Mario, who was kneeling by my side, holding my hands and covering them with kisses. A terrible agony filled my heart, my breast felt as if it were in a vice. 'Mario! Mario!' I stammered, feeling as weak as a child. 'It isn't true, is it? Oh, tell me it isn't true! that I have made a mistake, read it wrong! It is not possible.'

'What, my dear child? What is the matter? What has happened?'

'That paper! you haven't read it? Papa! darling papa! poor papa! O my God, my God!' I cried, as I fell sobbing into his arms.

What agony it was! I dare not linger over these memories. The mere fact of recalling them brings back all the horror, for the wound is still so slightly healed that the slightest touch opens it afresh.

Mario seized the paper and ran over it hurriedly. He crumpled it up and threw it angrily from him.

'These abominable papers!' he muttered through his clenched teeth. 'Doubtless there is not one word of truth in this news—some telegram wrongly dictated, or stupidly translated.'

'Isn't it?' I said, catching painfully at this ray of hope. 'It must be a mistake—it is impossible. This telegram says——'

It said, alas! that the Angelis expedition had all perished—massacred by Arab robbers. Not one single European had escaped the assassins.

'Try and be calm and keep up hope till

more positive news arrives,' said Mario to me. 'I will at once take steps to get the best information. I am certain there is not a word of truth in that telegram. The surest way would be to go myself to the Foreign Office, but how can I leave you now, you are trembling all over?'

'I will go with you, I will start too,' I said, attempting to rise—but I fell back heavily.

'No, it is not possible;—you see yourself you are not in a fit state to travel. Stay quietly here and wait for me, it will only be a matter of four-and-twenty hours.'

'Four-and-twenty hours! Alone, quite alone here! O my God! you will find me dead from anxiety when you return. Don't leave me, Mario, I have no one but you in the wide world!'

'I will stay if you prefer it, but we shall be longer without news.'

'No! no! start then, start at once! O my God, grant that it is not true. My God! my God! I implore thee! Oh, if I knew how to pray! If I were good and holy like Beata, perhaps Thou wouldest grant my prayer. Oh, if Beata were here! It seems to me that if her

arms were round me, I should find courage to bear the anguish of this suspense!'

'You would like to see Beata?' Mario asked very softly.

'Beata!' I repeated, 'yes, indeed!'

I longed so earnestly to see her, that I felt as if her mere presence would reassure me, calm my agony, and give me patience to await my husband's return.

'Shall I write to her?' he asked.

'You know she cannot come,' I replied rather impatiently. 'It is useless. They would not even give her any letter coming from here.'

'Perhaps if Generosa took it and gave it directly to her German maid. Shall I try, Palma?'

When Mario left Ventaglia by the midnight train, he left me weeping in Beata's arms. Spite of her excessive weakness, spite of the grave danger to which she exposed herself, in the event of the Cecchi becoming aware of her absence, she never hesitated to come to me at Mario's request. Having already retired for the night to her own apartments, she left the palace under cover of the darkness. As Monsieur

Mohrenstein was away from Serramonte at the time, she could do so unknown to any one save the stout German. She came on foot with Generosa to the farm where the latter had left the carriage in which she had driven up. She passed the whole night by my side; what she said I scarcely knew; she spoke but little, but the touch of her transparent hand, the kisses of her pure lips, the tears she mingled with mine, the calm which the mere fact of her presence brought to me, were more efficacious than other remedies could possibly have been. Soothed by her gentle voice whispering words of tender consolation, I slept at last, crushed by the first sorrow of my life. When I awoke in broad daylight, she was still there, and for the first time I thought of something else than my own sorrow. 'Beata, are you still there?' I asked. 'What will they say above, at your house?'

'Do not distress yourself about me, Carina. How do you feel?'

'Better, stronger, more encouraged—but what about you, Beata? If what they say is true, how will you be received when you return? Don't stay any longer, I beseech you. You have given me such a striking proof of your

love. I am stronger now, and shall have courage to remain alone till Mario comes.'

'I promised your husband not to leave you till his return.'

'How good of you! He will not delay coming to bring us good news. It is not true what that wretched paper said, is it? Ah, no! it is not possible,' I cried vehemently. 'God is good and just. He would not have permitted such a terrible misfortune to overtake my father, who is so good and so charitable, and who never harmed a single creature. It would not be fair. It would be cruel, it would be unjust!'

She pressed my hand tightly. 'Hush, Palma, you are blaspheming, my poor child! Do you think that our happiness or our sufferings here below, are measured by our merits? Who drained the cup of human suffering to the dregs? Who died the death of a criminal amid tortures a thousand times more cruel than the sufferings the very thought of which makes you tremble? The Just and Holy One, the only one of the children of men who was infinitely pure and selfless, and had never known sin. It was precisely on Him the most cruel

pangs were heaped. And shall we dare to accuse God of injustice when He sees fit to inflict on our loved ones, the suffering He did not spare His own Son? Yes, Palma, weep if you will. I would much rather see your tears, than hear you rebel and blaspheme. Still, darling, don't let us forget that this terrible news has not yet been confirmed.'

Alas! it was only too fully so, by the information Mario brought back with him, though he did not tell me all the truth. As soon as he arrived, Beata left me, promising to let me know during the day how she managed to get back into Serramonte: she treated my fears on this head very lightly.

Mario showed me the deepest sympathy and lavished the most touching care on me. But my happiness had fled: all my joyous past had perished in this bloody tragedy. Even Mario's presence was powerless to calm me. I longed to be able to do something, to start off, to go and seek for fresh information; I was almost angry with Mario, for his assiduity on my behalf and his inaction.

'My poor child! What can I do to calm your agitation?' he said very gently. 'There

remains only one step I can take—which is to go to Rome and see the Angelis family. I know Antonio's mother and brothers slightly. Shall I go? I am quite ready to do so if you wish it.'

'Ah! if only I could go with you!'

'That is not the least possible.'

'No, that is true, but I will wait. This time I will be more patient and resigned, I will remember Beata's words. Perhaps she will come again and see me. Yes, go, my beloved; come back quickly and bring me good news.'

He consulted a time-table. 'By taking the five o'clock morning train I shall be in Rome that same evening. It will be impossible to say certainly when I shall return. I will send a telegram for the carriage to meet me at the station.'

He started, leaving me so weak, so weary, that I had not the energy to leave my bed; it was the first time my physical strength had given way. I spent the whole day in a kind of wretched, half drowsy state, which prevented my thinking even. The next day, wishing to get up, I was carried by Generosa in her strong

arms, just as I had been when a child, and laid on the sofa, at the foot of which she sat on the ground, close to me in the attitude of a faithful dog.

My head was clear and I could think. 'I shall certainly have a telegram to-day,' I said. But I waited for it in vain, hour after hour: towards evening I began to grow uneasy. 'Perhaps he wishes to surprise me by his return,' I said to reassure myself, and then I studied the train book. 'If he found the Angelis yesterday evening when he arrived in Rome, he might have caught the morning train, and may be here to-night.'

Towards midnight, my anxiety rose to fever-pitch; in vain I tried to sleep. Suddenly the great bell at the gate rang, and I bounded to my feet.

'There he is!'

No, it was only a little boy, son of one of the railway employés, who brought a piece of paper and insisted on giving it to me himself. I made him come into my room. He had run barefoot that he might be as quick as possible, and was breathless. In his hand he held a small piece of crumpled paper, folded in four. 'I pro-

mised to deliver this paper to the lady herself,' he said when he had recovered his breath.

'Who gave it to you?'

'The Signora Beata. She had just arrived by the 10.25 train from Rome. She was with the Signor Carlo, who was dragging her by the arm. She looked as if she could not walk another step; she was like a dead person. He had to lift her in his arms to get her into the carriage. As she passed through the wicket and gave up her ticket, she saw me. I was waiting to see if I could carry any luggage—she had none. She bent down and gave me this paper, telling me to carry it at once to Ventaglia and give it to the Signora Palma herself.'

'Poor Beata!' I thought. 'What can have happened? Perhaps they are going to kill her!'

Generosa carried off the boy.

I drew near to a lamp and unfolded the scrap of paper, which was part of a blank leaf torn out of a book. In pencil, and in a trembling, almost illegible hand, Beata had scrawled these words: 'For Mario's sake, for God's sake, obey me without understanding me.

Start immediately for Rome, Vigna Benzi, Via Appia: you will find Mario wounded, but still living!'

From that instant all power of thought left me; I acted like a machine moved by some strange impulse. I followed Beata's advice to the letter. I obeyed, comprehending nothing—I did not even attempt to do so, I knew I was incapable of reflection. Like an automaton, I began at once to dress. When Generosa returned, after having seen to the messenger and gossiped with him to her heart's content, she found me dressed and ready to put on my hat.

'Signora!' she cried indignantly, 'you surely are not thinking of such a thing! You cannot go out at this hour of the night! *Madonna Santa!* what do you mean to do? You won't find the Signora Beata in lower Serramonte—they have carried her up above, where, according to the boy, they have locked her up, and probably they will murder her. You shall not go! They will kill you too!'

'Silence, Generosa—don't speak to me—you weary me. Go and order the carriage immediately, I must start instantly.'

She strove to dissuade me.

'Get out of my way,' I said angrily. 'Your presence is unbearable. If you do not at once order the carriage, I shall start on foot.'

I felt, that if I could not do something, set off, act, I should go mad. When I was dressed I began pacing up and down my room aimlessly like an infuriated wild beast. I should have greatly preferred going on foot to the station, for the horses did not go half fast enough to please me. I arrived at the station much too soon for the Roman train, which was the same Mario had gone by the day before yesterday. I had never before travelled alone, and I remember now, with strange vividness, a thousand trifling incidents which I was actually unconscious of at the time they were passing before my eyes. I fancy the regular monotonous motion of the train did me good, for it gradually calmed the burning fever in my brain. About the middle of the journey I began to think, to wonder what I was doing, where I was going, and what could possibly have happened. In the same carriage as myself there was an old French lady, a kindly motherly person with a sympathetic countenance. At Ortobello her

maid brought her a tempting breakfast on a tray. She looked at me with interest.

'You have tasted nothing since this morning, and you look so ill,' she said gently. 'Will you share this breakfast with me?'

I seized a glass of water from the tray eagerly and drank it off. 'A little cold chicken?' persisted the old lady kindly.

It was impossible to eat—an iron hand seemed clutching at my throat. Her attentions, even her kindness, hurt me, it pained me to find her benevolent looks fixed on me.

A newspaper boy passed the carriage, and suddenly it struck me that in some one of his papers I might find a telegram relating to my father—perhaps find the explanation of the mystery in the midst of which I was struggling like a shipwrecked mariner. I bought a paper and with feverish haste glanced through the latest news.

One word arrested my gaze with that kind of fascination which one feels when a well-known and familiar name catches one's eye at once, either in a newspaper or in a book—'Via Appia!' I read through, without the least comprehension of the meaning, a short article headed :—

SCANDAL IN HIGH LIFE.

Yesterday morning a crime was committed in a country house, situated on the Via Appia.

A young wife, well known in the circles of Roman society before her marriage, and through her mother's family connected with the Roman aristocracy, eloped to this country house, with a dashing young officer of the Piedmontese army. It appears that the husband of the lady did not relish this expedition to the country retreat. Accompanied by the brother of his wife he came to disturb this idyl. The facts of the case being incontestable, he lodged a ball in the breast of the young officer, who lies at death's door. The husband, who is a foreigner, went himself to the police station to make a declaration of the circumstances.

No name, not even initials. Why should this scandalous story interest me in any way? After all there was nothing new in it. I had so often read or heard of a similar triple tragedy — the unfaithful wife, the husband taking the law into his own hands, the murdered lover. With my intolerance as a young bride, I made excuses for the betrayed husband, nay, I felt he had done well to avenge his cruel wrong and to slay the other man. And yet I shuddered, without knowing why I did so. This other man? who was he? No! I would rather not think about it at all; I was

afraid now of comprehending it too well. Then the whole truth flashed into my mind! A fearful clearness of intelligence replaced my previous condition of torpor and numbness. When I left the train I heard the old lady say softly 'Poor young thing' as she shook her head. I did everything mechanically, with a calm that terrified me. I no longer recognised my own identity. The cab into which I got, set me down at the door of a small villa blooming like a flower amidst the ruins and ancient tombs which surrounded it. Hidden amongst luxuriant vegetation in a perfect thicket of climbing roses, vines, iris in full bloom, cactus and aloes, it was enclosed by a high wall which completely concealed the house from the outside world—while plantations of young eucalyptus trees flourished in every direction around it.

What should I find in this nest? What was I about to learn here?

I no longer asked myself any questions: the certainty of the truth had been borne upon me with cruel force. Already prepared for every misfortune by the abrupt announcement of my poor father's tragic end, nothing any longer surprised me.

Without reflexion, without accounting to myself for anything, without wondering how this could have come to pass, I knew exactly what I was going to discover. I shed no tears —with burning eyes and parched throat, I felt as if I were another woman, not myself.

'The Marquis Arsina?' I said coldly to the old woman who came to open the closed door.

Her eyes were red with weeping. 'He is still alive,' she answered, 'but——' She shook her head, and her eyes swam in tears which she wiped quickly away. 'Do you wish to see him?' I followed her — passing through a group of persons who were standing whispering together. My brother-in-law stepped out of the circle with a cry of surprise and came towards me.

'How is it possible you can have received a telegram already?' he asked rather uneasily.

'I have received no telegram,' I stammered. 'I know nothing—I wish to see Mario.'

He drew near to a door, and then turning to me he said before opening it, 'He is at his very worst, the ball cannot be extracted.'

'I wish to see him,' I repeated impetuously. He stretched his arm between me and the door.

'Before allowing you to go in,' he said very firmly, 'it is my duty to warn you, that in his present state he needs the greatest calm. A violent scene, any reproaches might——'

I hastily pushed aside his arm. 'Leave me,' I cried; 'I know nothing, I have heard nothing, no one has given me any explanation. I understand one thing only—I have no person left to me in the whole world but Mario,—he is there —he is dying, and you prevent me from going to his side!'

He bowed, and leaving the door, allowed me to enter. With that strange distinctness which, in critical moments of life, fixes the veriest trifle indelibly on the memory, I noticed all the details of the furniture in the pretty little drawing-room, on one of the sofas of which a bed had been hastily arranged. A monk with the face of an ascetic stood aside to allow me to approach the couch. On the pillows I beheld my husband's face. With his eyes closed, his lips half opened, his breathing came hissing through them, each breath bringing a spasm of pain over his face. The bullet had lodged in the right lung. I saw nothing save that pale face contracted with agony! All my love

surged up into a flood of burning tenderness, causing me intolerable pain. Like a torrent of liquid lava, it swept away and destroyed everything in its way. Doubts, certainties, bitter feelings, anger, all vanished. I seemed to be no longer living myself. Mario was there, Mario my only love, suffering, dying. I knew nothing, I did not wish to know anything beyond this. Gently I stooped down over the poor tortured face, over the closed eyes, and called him by his name—'Mario!'

A faint smile flitted over his features; he tried to raise his eyelids, and murmured 'Beata!'

It was a dagger thrust into my very heart's core!

'No, Mario,' I said aloud, coldly, 'it is not Beata, it is I, Palma—your wife!'

With a terrible start, he sprang up, galvanised by the intensity of his emotion. 'Palma!' he cried in a hoarse voice, 'O my God! my God!'

His hands clutched the air, the blood gushed from his mouth—the priest drew near and pronounced the last benediction as he fell back. I saw that he was trying in vain to raise his head again—he opened his eyes wide and gazed

into mine, as I passed my arm under his head. 'Thanks,' he said with painful effort. Then making a great struggle he whispered, 'You are an angel, thanks for coming.'

For answer, I rested the poor head, as heavy as lead, on my breast, not knowing whether the feeling that rent my heart was hatred or love.

Afterwards—afterwards, when all would be over, when all the explanations should have been made to me, I should have ample time during my whole life, for bitterness, anger, vengeance, hatred.

But this 'afterwards' would not exist for me; I felt I should die with my husband, I was convinced of it. I wished for it, for I would rather have died without knowing the truth whatever it was, I preferred to know nothing. What was there left for me to do, or love on this earth, after two such bloody tragedies, which left me without father, without husband!'

A little longer endurance, till the moment when the breath should cease to gasp through the livid lips! The monk held the crucifix to the dying man and he kissed it, murmuring, 'Yes—all my trust—all my hope in Him——'

His eyes, fast becoming dim, were fixed on mine. 'You too, Palma,' he whispered, 'put your trust in Him. He will be your consolation.' A feeling of bitter revulsion filled my soul. How could he dare to give me any advice!, He!—the very words sounded like a sacrilege from his lips.

'Yes,' I said sternly, vainly struggling to keep down my overflowing indignation. 'We all need mercy and pardon.'

'Pardon!' he repeated in the midst of a spasm of agony. 'Palma! she is innocent—she—I swear to you——'

An icy shudder seemed to freeze me, I trembled with horror and repulsion; at that moment I felt I hated him! even his last thought was not for me! His last word was plainly a falsehood.

'Let us thank God that he has made so Christian an end,' said the friar after an awful silence.

I trembled with horror! he had died with a falsehood on his lips.

'Doubtless you are his sister!' asked the priest with some hesitation.

'I am his wife.'

He looked at me with surprise, then lowering his eyes, said simply, 'You did well to come—God will reward you. Let us pray now.'

But I could not pray, I could not even kneel. Rigid and cold as marble I left that room without a thought, like a machine, absolutely turned into stone.

The old woman came forward and offered her services, I did not even answer her; it never entered my mind to ask her for any particulars, any explanation, though no doubt she could have told me all I wanted to know.

The Duke del Biglio took my hand. 'I have had a room prepared for you,' he said affectionately. 'You must need rest.'

'I wish to go home.'

'I will take you back myself as soon as I have given all the directions, and taken all the necessary steps. My poor child, you cannot travel alone.'

I could not answer him one word. As soon as he left me, I walked out of the house, crossed the garden and got into the cab which was still waiting outside, and gave orders to be driven to the station. There I waited till the first train started for Florence. I do not know how

I got back to Ventaglia; I was astonished to find myself again in my own room, standing among all the familiar objects, which I no longer seemed to recognise.

All my ideas were in utter confusion, a bloody veil seemed over every object my eyes fell on. I seemed to see nothing in my surroundings but blood, blood everywhere. At Rome, that dead body that I had left with a bullet in its breast! and that other dead body, lying doubtless unburied on the sands of some Arabian desert, a prey to jackals and vultures. And I! what was I doing there, in this room flooded with the spring sunshine, and scented by the orange-trees in full blossom?

I hated the sunshine, the sweet perfume, the spring which mocked my grief, the teeming life which I no longer valued. What should I do with it henceforth? No single tie bound me to it. I had no one left to me on the earth—and Heaven seemed a great empty void, the calm blue of the sky smiling as if in mockery of my despair.

At my feet Generosa crouched sobbing, while she covered my hands with tears and kisses.

'O Lord! *O Madonna Santa!*' she cried. 'Weep at least! *bambina mia*, my treasure!'

'Leave me,' I said harshly. 'I wish to be alone.' And as she refused to leave me, her tears, finding no response in my heart, only irritated me. I pushed her sternly away. Right before me, in a handsome frame, the portrait of my husband looked at me with his most winning expression.

I seized it hastily and dashed it to the ground — the crash of its falling made me shudder. He was dead now. So much the better, I thought, with a rage that terrified me. I would rather know he was dead than living — continuing to deceive me as he had always—always done from the very first. Ah! the hypocrites! their kisses met on my cheeks, on my lips — Judas kisses! And I — I saw nothing! suspected nothing! How they must have laughed at me. Ah!—I burst out into a loud laugh. 'Yes, they might well laugh at my innocence, my simplicity, the kindness with which I helped them to carry out their infamous plans. Beata! the saint! the angel! Ah! I had indeed been a guileless fool.' With startling vividness my memory recalled a thousand little

trifling incidents, a thousand forgotten details, which all combined to confirm the humiliating conviction of my own blindness.

I understood it all now—my past lay spread out before me; but under what a changed aspect! Fool that I had been! I would neither see nor understand. My father had striven to make me guess the truth—to spare me pain—he had never dared to tell me plainly, but now I recollected numberless allusions on his part and numberless reticences too.

Why had he insisted on my telling Beata of my own love for Mario? He knew the connection between them, and he hoped she would prevent my marriage, and that she would desire to keep him entirely to herself.

But she! ah, she had been far too clever! that saintly Madame Mohrenstein! She was much too sure of her absolute power over Mario to be jealous of him: and without losing this power she had found means to bring about a rich marriage for him, penniless as he was, and to settle him in her own neighbourhood. She could always arrange secret meetings with him, thanks to the rocky path to Serramonte-Alto, which I had myself shown him. She

had trained me, fashioned me with her own hands, that I might be the easily-led, the easily-duped, complaisant wife, which her accomplice needed, while I! ah, I had been simple enough in all conscience! Every one knew or suspected the truth, Isabella Dell' Orso, Mademoiselle Fournier. Every one save myself!

'Go away,' I cried harshly to Generosa, who crept noiselessly to my side.

'Signora, some one wishes to speak to you.'

'I will see no one.'

She did not stir. 'Signora, it is a priest.'

'I will not see him. Tell him I am ill.'

'It is just when one is ill, one needs to see a priest,' she replied firmly enough. 'This one is very holy. It is the *curé* of Serramonte-Alto.' I burst out into a loud laugh.

'It seems everybody is holy up there! but I know their holiness. Give him some money. I suppose he has come to offer to say some masses for the dead. Pay him and let him leave me in peace! I will not see him.'

The door was left open. On the threshold I perceived a tall, thin, old man: his white head looking as if it had been chiselled out of ivory.

He was very tall and emaciated, and of so imposing an appearance that I involuntarily bowed my head before him.

'My daughter, I come to bring you the last request of a dying woman,' he said.

A cruel smile curled my lips. 'Oh! I know,' I answered ironically. 'She has been dying for a long time. Don't be uneasy! she will recover. It is I who am dying. She so well understands how to act the part of a saint that she will deceive God Almighty Himself. She will go to Paradise, while I shall be sent to Hell because I hate her. I hate her! Do you hear? I hate every one, the whole world!'

He fixed his stern glance on me, and went on as if he had not heard me. 'The Signora Beata is at the last extremity. Ere she dies, she wishes me to explain certain things to you, you cannot possibly understand. She also craves your pardon. I know your kind heart so well, that I have promised her you will bring it to her yourself.'

I stood up with my hands clenched, my eyes flaming. 'Ah! you know me, do you?' I said sneering. 'You thought, even you, that because I am a child still, only seventeen, you could do

with me as you pleased! I have long enough been the dupe of you all, but at last I see clearly. She thought that I might still be caught by her hypocritical airs, weep a few tears and then forgive! I was in such haste, was I not? to fall into their snares, to obey her when she told me to seek my husband in that very house, where they went together to hide their disgrace. She fancies I have not sufficiently trampled my dignity in the dust! I must go and humble myself still further before her. I! his wife! Let her die—let her die with her remorse, if she is capable of such a feeling. May the full weight of Mario's blood rest on her conscience —that will be simple justice! What have I done that I should suffer thus? If the innocent are tortured as I am, it is only fair that the guilty——'

He stopped me with a commanding gesture. 'To God alone belongs the right of judging all hearts,' he said. 'I am come to bring you the petition of a dying woman. Come and see her for the sake of the Saviour——'

I interrupted him. 'What you ask of me would either be a proof of the most heroic virtue, or an act of supreme hypocrisy. I am

capable of neither one nor the other. I cannot lie like her, and I am not a saint like her.'

He clasped his hands and closed his eyes as if in prayer. 'May you become so!' he replied. '*She* would not have hesitated for an instant. I must hasten away; my duty is with her, since I have failed in my mission to you. She is alone up there—a fresh access of fever would be fatal. What message shall I give her?' he asked coldly.

'If she repents sincerely,' I answered in the same tone, 'give her absolution; it will be more efficacious than any pardon of mine—and when she is dead—here, take five francs, you can say a mass for her.'

He looked at the money which I had placed in the hollow of his hand, then slowly drew forth from his pocket a little leather bag, which he opened, placed the money in it, and took out a rosary of boxwood. He held the crucifix attached to it in his fingers, and said softly as if speaking to himself: 'This is the image of the God-man, infinitely good and sinless, Who was betrayed and denied by His friends, nailed to the cross by His enemies, and Who forgave both equally. Before leaving you, my daughter,

will you allow me to offer up a prayer with you?'

'If it gives you any pleasure to do so,' I said with indifference.

My one thought was to get rid of this priest, who wearied and annoyed me. My heart was as dry and as hard as a rock. I knelt by his side mechanically. He made the sign of the cross and slowly began the Lord's Prayer.

'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive——' He stopped, and I looked up, not understanding this silence.

Suddenly I gave a loud cry, and burst into tears. 'I will go! I will go!' I cried, 'lead me there quickly, quickly! before I have time to think or reflect.'

He rose, and stretching out his emaciated hand, on which I leant like a child, said, 'That is right—I was sure of it, for we have prayed so earnestly for it.' The expression of his face had entirely altered, something gentle and paternal had taken the place of his previous severity.

I caught up a black veil and threw it over my head. 'Lead me,' I said, clinging to the arm of the old priest—'don't let me have time

to think. Shall the carriage bé got ready? It will take so long—I am afraid of thinking!'

'Yes, you are right, my poor child,' he said with infinite compassion. 'Leave it to me, trust yourself to me. I have my *biroccino* (small gig) below with the little horse that brought me here: he goes very quickly—we shall soon be up there.' He placed me by his side on the seat of the little two-wheeled vehicle, and touched the little Maremma horse, which darted off like an arrow from a bow.

A flood of glorious sunshine lit up all nature as if for a fête. I closed my eyes that I might not see the bursting life everywhere, for it gave me keen pain. 'Speak to me,' I said to the priest, 'speak to me, don't let me think!'

'Yes,' he answered. 'I owe you indeed many explanations.' Slowly, with a slightly monotonous drawling voice, like the song of a mother as she rocks her child to sleep, he told me of Beata's happy childhood, her youth surrounded by loving care, the wise and Christian education she had received in the midst of choice spirits, while with her grandmother who was a noble woman, and who, knowing the home that awaited her if ever the Cecchi

claimed her, had sought to arm her against all possible evil fortune. With the desire of saving her from it, she wished to choose a husband for her who would be acceptable to the Cecchi. But from her earliest youth, Beata had given her heart to Mario, and had her grandmother lived, possibly the latter might have found means to ensure Beata's happiness by purchasing the consent of the Cecchi to this marriage, which on account of Mario's want of fortune they would not even hear spoken of. She died, unfortunately, very suddenly, before she had time to alter her will, made at a time when it seemed Beata would never need the fortune she might have bequeathed to her, and when the legacy of the small country property on the Via Appia was left to her, merely as a token of her affection.

Before she arrived at Serramonte, Beata knew her father would never consent to her marrying a penniless officer. He had told her that rather than consent to it, he would find means to get rid of him altogether, and she knew he was a man who would carry out his threat.

'It was just at this time I first knew her,'

said the priest, 'and received her full confession. Knowing well that if she persisted in her love, she would bring about the ruin of the man she adored, she was firmly resolved to give it up, to renounce all hope of earthly happiness, and to turn all her thoughts heavenwards. Mario made a last attempt to shake her resolution; he sought her out at Serramonte-Alto, by the path up the hill, and there implored her to escape from the surveillance of her father and brother and to fly with him.

She resolutely refused, firmly persuaded that if she yielded to the temptation, she would bring about the ruin of him she loved, expose him to the bitter enmity of her father and brother, and finally perhaps become a burden on him, dragging him down to ruin, regrets, and positive privation.'

Then he told me of the ardent wish felt by Beata, to shut herself up in a convent, and of the cruel opposition of her father, who commanded her to marry Monsieur Mohrenstein instead.

She submitted to this without resistance, having placed her hope far above all earthly happiness, and she determined faithfully to

fulfil her duty to Monsieur Mohrenstein to the uttermost, thankful that he would carry her away with him to a foreign country, as she wished to live far away from Mario. When, however, he brought her back to Serramonte, she trusted it was only for a short visit. The immediate arrival of Mario also, who had heard of her return and whose sole aim was to see her again, was a terrible grief to her. She had trusted that time and absence would have weakened his feeling for her. Then when I, Palma, confessed to her my love for Mario, her resolution was immediately taken. She flattered herself that Mario would find in my tenderness the best possible remedy for a hopeless, aimless love, that could only wreck his life.

'She came to see me,' said the *curé*, 'and confided to me all you had told her. I heartily approved of her determination to promote your marriage. She was generous, wise, and worthy of herself. She told me she had arranged a meeting with the Marquis Arsina for that very day, and she begged me to be present at their interview, the first since her marriage with Monsieur Mohrenstein. She was perfectly sure of herself, but she did not choose to speak

without a witness. How could I ever describe that meeting to you? I am an old priest, inured to all the emotions of sorrow and death, but my tears flowed spite of myself. Every argument that the most ardent piety, the most saintly affection could urge, she used to persuade that young man, that his duty was to forget the past and to start on a new life. For you, my poor child, he felt the tenderest affection, the deepest respect, and he asked nothing better than to devote himself entirely to promoting your happiness. But she exacted a binding promise from him, that he would strive to banish every memory of their past dreams and hopes as she had herself done, and he promised he would henceforth endeavour to lead a serious, useful life. With admirable clearness she made him acquainted with all the details of your position with regard to her father, and gave him such clear advice on the subject, that the most experienced business man could not have done better. She said, 'We must save this family from the ruin my people desire to drag them into; we must dedicate ourselves to promote this child's happiness, she is so good, so frank; we must watch over her, and shield

her from misfortune, for she is not prepared to meet trouble.'

What more can I tell you? When they parted, I made them kneel, and never did a more earnest prayer, a more ardent blessing pour forth from my priest's heart than at that moment. They never saw each other from the day——'

Here I broke in: 'They did meet again—I know that Mario went frequently to Serramonte.'

'I also know he did, but he came to visit me, as I had asked him to do. I desired to know all that was going on in his heart, to see if he held true to his resolutions, and I thought my counsel might be helpful to him. I had the joy of seeing, at each visit from him, how his love for you increased, and the excellent influence your sweetness and devotion was gaining over him. I carefully avoided telling him of Beata's position, which, when her father discovered her interference on your behalf, would have been unbearable to any daughter save herself. It required all her heroic patience and her angelic piety to endure the martyrdom inflicted on her daily. When on the news of your poor father's misfortune you sent for her, she did not for an

instant hesitate about going to you, though she knew that she actually risked her life by doing so. The violence with which she was received on her return to Serramonte terrified her; for her husband was not there to protect her. For herself she had no fear, for she was ready long since to yield up her life as calmly as she had given up her happiness, but she wished to spare her father the remorse of a crime she knew he was quite capable of committing in a moment of passion. Never having been accustomed to restrain his violent temper, he might in fact have struck her a fatal blow without actually meaning it. She wrote to tell me she had made up her mind, and meant to start for Rome, a fugitive and alone. There she intended to await in the little house that belonged to her, the return of her husband, whom she had in vain implored to take her with him when he had left her at Serramonte.

A fatal coincidence caused the Marquis Arsina to start for Rome by the very same train, but they were both unconscious of this fact till they arrived at their journey's end, and met at the station. He followed her to the little country house on the Via Appia, but she

positively refused him permission to cross the threshold. Perhaps had she allowed him to enter, the terrible tragedy might have been avoided. Terrified at the danger she incurred, he refused to go away : at all hazards he wished to see her again. He forced his way into the house next morning, and at the very moment he did so, Count Carlo and Monsieur Mohrenstein appeared unexpectedly on the scene—you know the rest.'

Later I learnt that it was Carlo who had summoned Monsieur Mohrenstein by telegram, before Beata's letter to her husband reached him, and it was Carlo himself who, just as they were starting for Rome, thrust a loaded pistol (his own) into his brother-in-law's hand.

It was no longer an outraged woman the priest conducted to Serramonte, but a woman of a crushed, submissive, resigned spirit. What I did then seemed quite natural ; an hour before I was dreaming only of hatred and revenge. I longed then to have Beata's heart in my hands that I might crush and destroy it. Now I followed the priest obediently through the crumbling dilapidated rooms, to the dying woman ; all my hatred utterly gone.

At the end of a large room I noticed the German knitting her eternal stocking.

'How is she?' asked the *curé*.

She shrugged her shoulders, as if to say there was no hope, and opened a door into the inner room. On a small iron bed, poor and narrow, as those used in hospitals, Beata lay as white as a lily. With her grand eyes, which looked unnaturally large, and the ecstatic expression on her blanched lips, she seemed to me more beautiful than ever. But it was an unearthly beauty, with the imposing majesty of all supernatural things.

At the sound of the opening door, she turned her eyes towards me, and instantly an ineffable expression of joy lit up her face as, stretching out her transparent hands to me, she whispered, 'I thank Thee, O my God! Palma! my poor Palma, my beloved child!' I laid my head next hers on the pillow, sobbing bitterly. 'I did so pray to God that I might not die till I had seen you again! Palma, what evil I have brought on you! brought on Mario too! Can you forgive me? My child, my darling! I who would so gladly have laid down my life to secure your happiness and his!'

I could not say one word in reply.

'My daughter, now that the invalid has seen you she will rest in peace,' said the priest after a long silence. 'She knows that you forgive her for having been the involuntary cause of your great sorrow. God will bless you for what you have just done. Now I am going to take you home.'

I raised my head, heavy with tears and sobbing. 'Home? No! no! To that empty house where I have no one left to me, nothing but the memory of the two dead bodies to haunt me? No! no!'

'Where do you wish to go, then?'

'Nowhere—ah, leave me here,' I said, as I suddenly threw my arms round Beata, crying, 'Beata, you are the only one left to me on earth. Let me stay with you! I want to die with you!'

She responded to my clasp and looked at me with intense tenderness.

'I will stay,' I said to the *curé*, who replied, 'Very well, you are right—it is the best thing you can do.'

What a vigil! what a night! I clung to the trembling breath which kept Beata still in life,

with the hopeless eagerness of a shipwrecked man. It was the last thing left me! Nothing to love! nothing to hope for!

I utterly forgot that Beata had been the involuntary cause of my misery. I remembered no longer the love Mario had felt for her, nor my former hatred towards her—a drowning man clutches at the first object within his reach. Beata's sufferings had ceased, she was simply now sinking gradually. Like the oil in a lamp, life was exhausted in her frail body, so long undermined by fever and sorrow, worn out too by the intensity of her struggles of heart and will.

She spoke to me gently of Mario, and her words had power to soften the bitterness of my grief. 'I had loved him so tenderly, Palma. His happiness to me was everything! I knew it was safe in your hands—I desired to disappear entirely from his life, for I knew I could only be a source of grief and trouble in it. Alas! I caused his death! He died, though, as a Christian: that is our sole comfort. The world judges from appearances, God knows the truth. Before Him and before you, he is innocent—by and by this will be your greatest consola-

tion! Oh, Palma, I have prayed so for you! Do you remember the talk we had long ago under the laurel-trees at Ventaglia? You were only a little girl then, you had only just found out you had a heart, and I trembled so for you. I longed to prevent that heart from breaking at the first touch of sorrow, for I had suffered so deeply myself. God had graciously taught me early the grand lessons, which He often allows grief to teach us, and I wanted to make you profit by my experience. Poor darling, He has taught you now Himself, He has made you pass through the furnace, but He will reveal to you the secret of happiness which is alone to be found in Him. He will give you strength to live for Him.'

'I do not care for life. I want to die with you.'

'I can well understand that, Palma! but you will live. You have so many duties to fulfil You have your fortune to manage prudently, not to enjoy it selfishly, but to make as many as possible around you happy, and to succour all who seek your aid. Instead of shutting up your heart and brooding over your grief, you must open it to all who suffer too, rise out of

yourself—and you will see that happiness will come to you at last, and spring too out of the happiness you have brought to others——'

'Ah! you have the courage to speak to me of happiness still! I can believe you are happy, very happy——'

'Oh! I should be perfectly happy if I had not brought this terrible trouble on you; if the weight of Mario's blood were not crushing me down. Think! I saw him fall to the ground—at my very feet! Why was it needful that the memory of this tragedy should darken the glorious hour of my death! This hour which will unite me to Him in whom I have trusted, when I shall see face to face the beloved Saviour! But you, poor darling, you must still live, still suffer—I am so sorry for you!'

Towards morning she fell into a peaceful sleep. When the doctor and the *curé* came into the room, I made a sign to them not to rouse her.

The doctor bent over the head which was resting on the pillow, touched the hands that were clasped as if in prayer, then turning, exchanged a look with the priest, who murmured, 'Requiescat in pace.'

CHAPTER VIII

WHEN I began to write the story of my past youth, I little suspected what a large place in my life this occupation would fill. My task is ended, but what shall I say about the eighteen years that followed the awful catastrophe which wrecked all the happiness of my young life?

On the ruins of this happiness, my daughter came and blossomed like a heaven-sent flower to win me back to life. Her happiness became my sole interest. I had not a thought of which she was not the centre and sole end. I had desired death, and in fact I was dead, for the Palma of former days no longer existed. She was replaced by Silvia's mother. I have made her live again in the pages of this manuscript only to bury for ever, even the recollection of what she once was.

And now that I have nothing further to confide, it costs me a pang to quit this book

which has become my *confidante*. What shall I henceforth do in the hours I used to spend in relating therein the story of my life?

A moment ago Silvia came into my room for my morning kiss, which to-day was more tender than usual. She found me writing.

'Still that mysterious book!' she cried gaily. 'Has it reminded you of the anniversary of to-day? I am eighteen, you know, exactly your age when I was born!'

Eighteen years! the half of my life. 'We have been very happy together all this time, *mamma mia!*'

'Yes, Silvia! I do love to hear you say so. Is there any special thing you would like to do to-day to make it happier than other days?'

'Nothing! you leave me nothing to wish for.'

'And you are never dull?'

'What an idea! dull! How could I be? I have not the time to be dull! My life is so busy, so full, what with our reading, our studies, our painting, our poor, our music, our school—where should I find time to be dull? You have made my life so complete, so busy, and you are so clever in making every occupation doubly interesting by sharing it.'

'But still, you are always alone; perhaps I have been a little selfish in shutting you up as I have done.'

She looked at me, laughing. 'But, mother dear, on the contrary I never am alone. Don't we do everything together—reading, walks, even that arithmetic which bothers your head so?'

'True, but still you might want to see some fresh faces, some companions of your own age, some one—not always—your old mother.'

She shook her finger at me. '*Mamma mia*, it is pure vanity that makes you say that. Look at yourself in this glass—at your face next to mine—any one would take us for sisters.'

I pushed aside the mirror, but I kept her arm round my neck. 'Silvia, I must really talk to you seriously. You are at an age now, when it is my duty to think about your future. I have been selfish, my child. I have so isolated you from the world, that if I were to die, you would not have a single friend or relation. Now that you are eighteen I must bring you out of this isolation. I tell you I must think of your future.'

'Which means, think of finding me a husband, doesn't it? Ah! now I have it! You

are anxious to find a gentleman, who on the plea that he cannot live without me! (though he has got on very well hitherto), will come and disturb our happy little life—come between us, separate us, and then take me away from Ventaglia to live I don't know where. I should have no objection to travel, but it would amuse me a great deal more to travel with you, and I could very well exist without this person who will come and break up our peaceful life. I am of Generosa's opinion, "Who takes a husband takes a plague."'

'They are not all plagues,' I said feebly; 'some are excellent.'

'Like the mushrooms St. François de Sales talks about, aren't they, mother darling? The best are not worth anything. No! no! you must resign yourself to seeing me end my days by your side, a veritable spinster. As we grow old together, the difference of age that separates us now will show less and less, till at last people will not know which is the elder of the two; we shall look like two respectable old maids. We will dress alike, and so I shall not always have to complain of your everlasting black gowns.'

Her gaiety pained me. 'That is all very well, Silvia, but before we reach that point, it is my duty to introduce you to the world you have never seen.'

'That means, *cara mamma*, that you are getting tired of being lonely here, and that you would like to see some of your old friends again.'

'It has nothing to do with me, Silvia; I am dead, and buried and forgotten. My life is over; it concerns your life, which is only just beginning.'

'Yes, I grant that, and I find the beginning so pleasant, that I dread any change: I should like to go on just as we are, to the end of the chapter. And then, mother darling, I want to talk to you seriously too. When a young girl is introduced into society it is taken for granted, is it not, that her education is finished? Now can you honestly say mine is? Am I fit to pass my examinations and win the famous diploma without which a girl is considered nowadays to know nothing? Let me study a little longer! I love my books so—when I have had enough of them I will tell you—and we will make our triumphal *entrée* together into that world where

I have to meet the husband whom I quite intend to refuse!'

Certainly she is a happy girl. Her frank gaiety is combined with serious thoughtfulness, which she owes, I think, to the studious solitude in which I have brought her up. I do not trace in her either the joyous carelessness of my own youth, or my impulsive impressionable nature. She is mistress of herself: she has read and thought much. Her beauty, like her charm, is of a serious type. Her heart is open to every generous feeling: I have never seen in her anything small, or mean, or puerile: but her generosity is united to practical common sense, which will teach her to avoid many of the shoals of life. Happy the man who wins such a treasure! Silvia's husband! I begin now to picture him! It is difficult to realise that he exists somewhere: that one day, perhaps soon, he will mingle in our calm peaceful life, to disturb it, perhaps to destroy its peace, and to make my darling suffer as I did; and she may have to experience for herself and for me, those moments of despair when the very heavens are like brass. No! fate does not often repeat itself; Silvia must be happy, for I

am there to watch over her, and by my love, to shield her heart from any sorrows that may threaten her. I shall be clear-sighted enough where my child's happiness is concerned.

'Still writing, mother dear! I shall be quite jealous of that manuscript; to-day at least you might put it aside and give yourself to me for the whole day.'

'I ask nothing better, and I will do it all the more willingly, as it's the only thing you have asked me to-day. Is there anything else you would like? Any present?'

'I was going to say no, but on second thoughts—yes. Give me that little book of poems you received yesterday, and which I see there on your table.'

'With all my heart.'

I wrote the date and my name above the author's signature, 'Valrogis,' and I gave it to her with a kiss.

'Thanks,' she said, turning over the leaves. 'Have you written to this "Valrogis" to find out if he is our relation?'

'No, but if you wish it, I will write this very day.'

'Thanks, mother. I should be charmed to

know there was any link whatever between you and my favourite author. Dear mother, in his works I have come upon pages so noble, so high-toned, so enthusiastic, that I seemed to read your own sentiments in his. I felt you were worthy of each other.'

I could not help laughing, for she looks at me through the prism of her love for me, and I have not the heart to destroy her illusion.

Ten months have passed since I last opened my manuscript. Meanwhile spring has succeeded winter, the almost intoxicating perfume of the blossoming vines has mingled with the scent of roses and orange-trees: now the heat of summer has ripened the fruit, and the bunches of purple or crimson tinted grapes hang in heavy festoons from the trellises which are bending under their weight, ready for the approaching harvest. A great event is expected at Ventaglia—namely, the arrival of a visitor: during the eighteen years following on my widowhood no stranger had penetrated its deep solitude, and now an unknown individual was on the point of doing so.

Unknown shall I call him? Scarcely that.

He was so at the beginning of the year, for I knew nothing of him save his name. Now, though his face is still that of a stranger to me, his name has become that of a true friend. How can I account for the place this unknown friend has acquired in my life? The first letter I wrote him (rather against my own wish), to please Silvia, I sent to his publishers, and to this he replied immediately, calling me his cousin. And so, in fact, he is—and not by any means a distant one. From the arrival of his next letter, a kind of family intimacy seemed to spring up between us. If we had met in society, we should probably have never gone further than the relationship of kindly cousinhood—our conversation might never have risen above the usual worldly or literary commonplaces. In corresponding with a stranger who was at the same time a relation, I opened out my heart and mind to him probably much more than I would have done, had we been face to face. Having already written for his perusal the story of my life, it seemed to me that the real Valrogis must have known me for years, and I at once put him on the footing of an old friend. I even allowed myself, while expressing

the sincere admiration I felt for his works, to criticise them in some particulars, and when my letter was posted, I would have given worlds to recall it, fearing I might offend him by my boldness. I awaited his answer with almost painful eagerness; one day, then two went by, and I began to fear I had fatally wounded the *amour propre* of my author, and thus by my own fault had deprived myself of much intellectual enjoyment, which was doubly precious to me in our isolated life.

The answer, for which I waited, soon scattered my fears to the wind. Instead of being the least offended, Valrogis thanked me for my criticisms. He praised the justness of my remarks, and earnestly besought me to continue to give a scrupulously candid judgment on all his writings.

As he had neither sister nor mother, the wholly unbiassed opinion of a woman would, he said, be infinitely valuable to him.

I may have presumed on this permission of his: this correspondence acquired such a place in my daily life, that it seemed to me it would be impossible to give it up, and shall I confess it?—I cannot help wondering if the presence

of Valrogis at Ventaglia, will quite make up to me for the charm of this correspondence which is about, of course, to be broken for a time.

I had created in my fancy a portrait of Valrogis the writer, which very probably the real Valrogis would utterly destroy or at least change beyond recognition. What was he like in his bodily presence? As I had never seen a picture of him, I had given a free rein to my fancy concerning him. At first I liked to think of him as young and handsome, but by degrees this fancy changed, and I frequently pictured him as weak, plain, suffering, even deformed—a small man whom nature had afflicted as far as his physique was concerned, to counterbalance the rich gifts of moral, intellectual beauty she had bestowed so lavishly on him.

The Valrogis I loved to imagine, now that he so freely opened out to me the treasures of his heart and mind, must be one in whom the keen sword wore out the scabbard, an invalid needing the constant attention of a sister or the loving care of a mother. He had been very reticent about all his personal matters. I was ignorant of a thousand things about him I longed to know, but I knew that he spent part

of his time in Paris, the rest in Burgundy ; that when in the provinces, he led the life of a country gentleman, hunting and busying himself also in the management of his land and his vineyards. He had met my father at the time of my grandmother's death — Madame de Valrogis, but these were the only details I had of his life and circumstances.

It was with lively interest I received the news of his approaching visit to Ventaglia ; he knew nothing of Italy, and proposed making a tour through it.

'I confess to you,' he wrote, 'that a stronger motive than mere curiosity attracts me to your beautiful country. I long to draw more closely the links that relationship and complete sympathy have formed between us.'

What can he mean ?

His plan is to spend the autumn and winter in Florence. Perhaps the time has come when it is my duty to silence Silvia's objections and overcome my own repugnance : perhaps it may be wise and prudent to reopen the old palace in Florence, deserted or occupied by strangers for the past eighteen years.

Without entering completely into that

Florence society where I have not a friend left, scarcely any acquaintances even, I might, however, gather around me some whose conversation would interest Valrogis. But I can see quite plainly that the dear child rather mistrusts everything that would change our present way of life. While she shares my desire of knowing Valrogis, she looks forward to his coming with somewhat of dread, never ceasing to say to me, 'We were so happy alone, we two! I dread this stranger who may come between us. Why does he want to come here? He will steal away some of my darling mother's heart.'

Jealous of this stranger! Silvia! All last night I dreamt of Valrogis, and the impression of my dream still lingers with me. His features! Well, I could only dimly perceive them, but he fixed his earnest gaze on me: his large unfathomable eyes were soft and calm like Beata's, and with a slow rather muffled voice he said, 'Poor Palma! poor unsatisfied heart! craving love and happiness. Poor wife! who only just touched the cup of love with her lips!'

Here I awoke, my heart saddened by the

dream, the uncomfortable impression of which I sought, but in vain, to shake off.

I have just read over again all the letters I have received from Valrogis, comparing one with another.

What name can I give to the sentiment they express so eloquently? A sort of magnetic influence seems to bind us together. An answer often came before the question was actually sent. What shall I call this strange sympathy? All the particulars I did not dare to ask from him, he gives me himself in this letter, the last I can have before his arrival. How could he guess a wish unexpressed by me? What instinct urged him to forestall a curiosity I had never revealed to him? He speaks to me at full length respecting himself, opening his heart entirely, as he tells me the story of his life. His age is almost the same as my own, but his past has never been clouded like mine by one of those dark tragedies that sever life in two, and leave us utterly different from what they found us.

His youthful years passed peacefully by, rather strictly I fancy, under the roof of his parents, who lived a patriarchal life on their

own estates. In the midst of numerous occupations and studies which he delighted in, he reached man's estate without ever experiencing the great storms of passion and love. His temperament led him rather to the enjoyment of intellectual pursuits, so that he had lived through no romance save those in his own books.

He had never married, because up to this time he had met with no woman who realised his ideal, and he would marry no one else.

To him marriage was the complete union of two souls. When by chance he found himself attracted by beauty, he always distrusted himself; as in his opinion the dazzling of his eyes prevented his forming a calm judgment; and he feared above everything, being led by his mere senses. He desired to find in her who should be the companion of his life, above all, a sister soul, imbued with the same tastes, ideas and opinions as his own.

Why should he write all this? Is it wrong? Have I really still the right to cherish new dreams, illusions, hopes as I now do?

I am thirty-six years of age: my daughter may marry any day and leave me: such is the

natural order of things — then I should be alone—utterly alone.

Not only actually so, but without any other affection, without a soul to advise me, protect me, watch over me, relieve me of the burden of those cares that often at times crush me to the earth. Am I mad or wrong to dream of something else than this lonely life?

I feel my heart overflowing with tenderness, that seeks to lavish itself on some object; I can scarcely understand such a feeling, but it springs up almost in spite of myself like a river rushing down a rapid towards another heart united to mine by an all-powerful sympathy. What name can I give to this sympathy? I have never been really loved! I, who was conscious of such stores of tenderness and devotion in my own heart; that so longed to pour them out ungrudgingly—I had never been loved! Mario married me in obedience to Beata, seeking to find in the affection he knew I felt for him, a remedy for the suffering his hopeless love for her brought him.

He loved her in caring for me. He would never have married me for my own sake, and

he would never have sought me for my fortune, for he was quite disinterested on that score. Whilst I gave him unreservedly my whole self, without any doubt, without any *arrière pensée*, he, of course, always felt, that between him and me rose the memory of his regrets, his shattered hopes, and above all the image of that other woman who was so perfect, so bewitching, so supremely beautiful. He knew perfectly that his love for her was quite hopeless, but his marriage with me only brought him nearer to her, for when he settled at Ventaglia, he felt he would never lose sight of her. And I! . . . But in those days, child though I then was, I knew he was not perfectly happy with me—and perhaps this prevented my loving him as intensely as I know I am capable of loving. This first love of mine was like a fever, it never rose higher than an intense thirst after true happiness.

Now, oh God! I tremble when I realise the depth and intensity of the love which would spring up in my heart if I allowed it freedom to follow its own inclination. To lead a life which would be the complete, entire union of our two souls, when we had both reached that

period of life, in which human beings are in full possession of all their faculties, when to the ephemeral blossoms of youth succeed the ripe fruits of maturity;—to seek in this mutual love and perfect trust, a refuge from the sadness of autumn, the melancholy of closing years, and strengthened by our warm affection, to meet our last hour together, resting one upon the other, what a dream of bliss! But is it really granted to me, to prolong my life and to contemplate its close through the mirage of this vision which displays itself before my gaze like one of those glorious sunsets, whose splendid colours and concentrated flaming lights are a thousand times more dazzling than the rays of the noonday sun or the pale light of dawn?

In place of that heart-loneliness which drives one to seek for happiness outside of oneself, to be content to be nothing but an echo, a reflection of others' joy, to find within one's own soul the spring of such happiness, to have only to listen to one's own heart to hear it singing the eternal and sublime hymn of mutual love, of satisfied desires, realised aspirations, could that really be possible for me?

I fancied I had utterly renounced all wish for

personal happiness, buried for ever all dreams of reciprocated love. Still it would be so sweet, I thought, to be able to abdicate in favour of some one so infinitely superior to myself, all the authority which sometimes weighs so heavily on one, to be able to lay down the burden of responsibility, to confide Silvia's future as well as the cares and management of my large fortune to a wise man, of ripe experience, who could guide and advise me. And then to give myself up to be led, loved, and petted as I had been in the happy old days by my poor father!

A sob broke from my heart. I felt like a child once more, so feeble, so unprotected, so unable to fight on by myself. But this is wrong. O my God! Thou wilt help me to struggle against such weakness. Whence did Beata draw her strength, her resignation, her unshaken calm? Had she only the courage to maintain an outward calm amid the storms that shook her soul, as they now shake mine, or had she really grown to be so holy, with her heart so weaned from earthly things, that nothing had any power to shake her faith and trust?

The October moon is so bright that I have

written these lines by its rays. It floods the landscape with its silvery light, causing the trees and houses to stand out clear with their soft shadows. In the far solemn distance the cry of the owl is distinctly heard; and the monotonous, almost weird sound prevents me from sleeping, though heart and body feel tired out. This splendid autumnal night is warmer and more relaxing than a summer one would be; nature has clothed with a voluptuous beauty all things that have attained their maturity. The air seems charged with electricity, heavy with the perfumes of drooping flowers, and the smell of fermenting juices. The new wine is bubbling in the wine-press, the ripe figs and bursting pomegranates exude with juice as sweet as honey, the second crop of mown hay lies drying in the meadows.

Low down on the far horizon masses of tawny clouds are slowly gathering, bringing with them the storm that will dispel from the sultry air the electricity that is no doubt the cause of my depression.

Years ago Beata said to me, 'You will be happy when you have given up all hope of

personal happiness, when you find your joy in that of others.'

Valrogis expressed a wish to see Serramonte, saying to me, 'You have driven me all over your beautiful neighbourhood, you have shown me all its picturesque spots, all that are historical or artistic, why have you never taken me to see that ancient fortress which stands out so bare and distinct on the summit of the hill?'

Silvia looked at me rather anxiously. 'Mamma never drives in that direction,' she said vaguely.

Valrogis lowered his eyes. 'Pardon me, my cousin,' he said very softly. 'I ought to have guessed.'

'Silvia will take you there if you like,' I answered with an effort.

He turned to her almost timidly. 'Will you really?'

She blushed, and it was not the first time I noticed her blushing when he addressed her specially. She struck me then as more than ever like one of those tall, graceful, stately Florentine irises, to which I always loved to compare her.

And Valrogis, he whom I had almost desired to find mean in appearance, if not actually deformed, because I fancied he must in common fairness lack personal beauty, so richly was he endowed with all moral gifts; he is as fair to see, as perfect as she is.

Why had I not the courage to go with them to Serramonte? Was it the memory of the past that prevented me? Alas, no! The Cecchi had passed away; the factory had been purchased by a company of German shareholders; the castle was a mere ruin; the *contadini* completing its destruction by using it as a quarry, from which they drew the stones needed to repair their cottages. Goats browsed on the jasmine and wild myrtle which filled the little cemetery or *campo santo* where Beata's deserted grave lay.

Why had I not the courage to go with them?

When they returned a short time since, they joined me under the orange-trees of the terrace. Silvia's sweet face shone with the delicate colouring of a wild rose petal, and a smile played on her lips; she evidently had brought back no sad associations from Serramonte.

She threw her arms round me and held me tight in a way that surprised and thrilled me, for she is seldom demonstrative. Without telling me anything of their visit, she walked slowly back towards the house in her usually stately way like a young queen.

Valrogis came and seated himself near me, but he seemed absent and hesitating.

'Have you had a pleasant walk?' I inquired, by way of saying something.

'Ideal!'

'Was I wrong not to go with you?'

He looked up rather surprised, but replied courteously, 'I deeply regretted your absence.'

'Oh, Silvia must have given you far more interesting information than I could have done, for she knows our country much better than I do; she has read and studied so much.'

'Yes, hers is indeed a rare mind!' he answered warmly. 'My cousin, before I came here, I scarcely dreamed of a person so perfect as yourself. That an enthusiastic woman, pardon the word, an imaginative person like yourself, should be capable of every high thought, with a clear insight into all great and noble aims of heart and mind, I knew

already from your letters; but that this woman should be such a mother as you are, I must frankly say I never for one moment expected.

My cousin, I cannot tell you how I esteem and venerate you. Do you know, for the past ten months you seem to have engrossed almost every thought of mine. I no longer write a single page without asking myself, 'What would she think of this? What would be her judgment on it?' It seems to me now that I cannot do without your approval; your judgment is to me that of the law and the prophets. Do you know, I came here with a secret dread. I kept asking myself whether the reality could come up to the ideal I had formed in my own mind of the kind cousin who had so graciously treated me with such frank confidence.'

My heart beat loud.

He looked at me gravely and respectfully. 'Now my cousin, I venerate you, for whereas before I knew only the woman, now I know the mother. As on my knees, I speak to the woman, who while yet in her full youth, rich, beautiful, formed to be adored, to receive universal homage, and to enjoy life, had the

courage to renounce all personal happiness, and to devote herself entirely to promote the happiness of others. I do not speak of your masterpiece, the education of Silvia, but of the good you do to every one around. Now pray do not let your modesty take fright at this poor praise from me. I have visited your schools, your hospital, your little sisters of the poor, and I can only say you must indeed find your happiness in the happiness you shed around you far and near.'

I ought to do so, O my God—I ought. He is right. The days fly past quickly—quickly, and at the same time they are so full that each hour as it goes, seems to bring something new. I tremble for the future, I dare not think about it. The drooping vine-leaves hang mournfully from the trees in yellow festoons withered like the garlands after a fête day. The ripe olives begin to put on their purple tints, the flocks come trooping from the mountains on their road to the Maremma plains.

I have just been talking over our winter plans with Silvia; we must soon begin to think of leaving Ventaglia and settling in at Florence for the winter.

'Why must we leave so soon?' Silvia asked. 'Are you really so anxious to plunge into society again?'

'No, my child, but it is my duty now to think of your future.'

A faint smile flitted over her lips, as she turned a happy look on me, and repeated slowly, 'My future.'

At this moment Valrogis joined us in the *loggia*, which was lit up with the last dying rays of the setting sun; he held in his hand a branch of lilac in full bloom.

'Poor flower,' he said, offering it to Silvia, 'it has mistaken the season.'

'Poor flower!' she answered as she inhaled its perfume. 'I know exactly where you found it—close to the marble faun. This tree flowered too soon last spring, and I feared it was dead, for it seemed to dry up and lose all its leaves under the power of the summer heat.'

'Yes, you have guessed rightly,' he replied.

Had he quite forgotten his own comparison between these untimely blossoms and the strange barren affections that often spring up late in a woman's heart, when she has not found in her early love, the happiness she hoped for?

He turned to me saying, 'Do you know, my cousin, I greatly miss the letters that used to pass between us so frequently. I fancy just now I could write you many things I could not say to you in words, and you on your part have lately become strangely silent and reserved with me. It seems to me that if only you had your pen in your hand, you would impart to me far more freely your thoughts and feelings.'

'Perhaps,' I replied, 'I should do so only too openly. But why do you not confide to me all you would write?'

'Not yet,' he answered—'later, perhaps.'

For more than an hour I have been watching the two. Silvia, wrapped in a soft white shawl, is seated on the balustrade of the terrace, her eyes turned on him, her lips half open as she listens to him speaking. His expression is more eloquent even than his words. They are so happy! so very happy!

I asked Valrogis to give me back all my letters, and he has done so reluctantly, for he declares they are his chief treasures, that he values them above his own manuscripts! I promised to return them to him. I have since read them all through, with the most scrupulous

care, with the attention even of a jealous woman, seeking to find in them some trace of a dreaded rival; but I could not discover in the whole correspondence a single word that was too tender, nor a single expression that could be interpreted in any way that would reveal my painful and trembling secret which must never be known to any but God Himself.

Had it been otherwise, I think I should have died of shame.

. . . . . .

They had no confession to make to me, not even the usual formal proposal. Valrogis simply came to me holding Silvia's hand in his. For a moment, just one, my heart seemed as if it must burst. He takes away everything from me at a stroke! All that is left of my youth, my last illusions, my last mistake, my last woman's dream of happiness, above all my child!

But what better fate could I have desired for her? The happiness I was mad enough to dream of for myself, which I esteemed as the greatest of life's treasures, does she not deserve it far more than I do? To whom could I entrust my daughter, with a nobler heart,

higher aims, or a more trustworthy character than Valrogis?

I had deemed him worthy of my own love, what possible objection could I urge against him now when he came and asked for Silvia's hand? I raised a feeble remonstrance on the score of disparity of age, but I never waited to hear his reply to this. He is thirty-five, just one year younger than myself, but then Silvia at eighteen is so serious, so grave, so sensible, that I feel she might not be happy with a very young husband.

As for me! I shall soon be grey-headed, and I shall be Valrogis' mother-in-law. 'His mother-in-law!' I keep repeating the word to myself that I may grow accustomed to the sound.

They will soon leave me—travelling at first for some time, and then they intend to settle on his estate in France—and they will leave me here alone—*quite* alone!'

Alone! O my God! not alone! I will devote myself with fresher energy than ever to promote the happiness of all my poor friends and neighbours. The knowledge that all these simple folk owe their happiness and well-being

to my care of them, will fill up and satisfy my otherwise empty life.

I shall live too in Silvia's life and interests, happier far in her joys, than I should have been had the selfish desires of my own heart been gratified.

Alone! with Thee! O my God!

THE END

OCT 4 1917

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